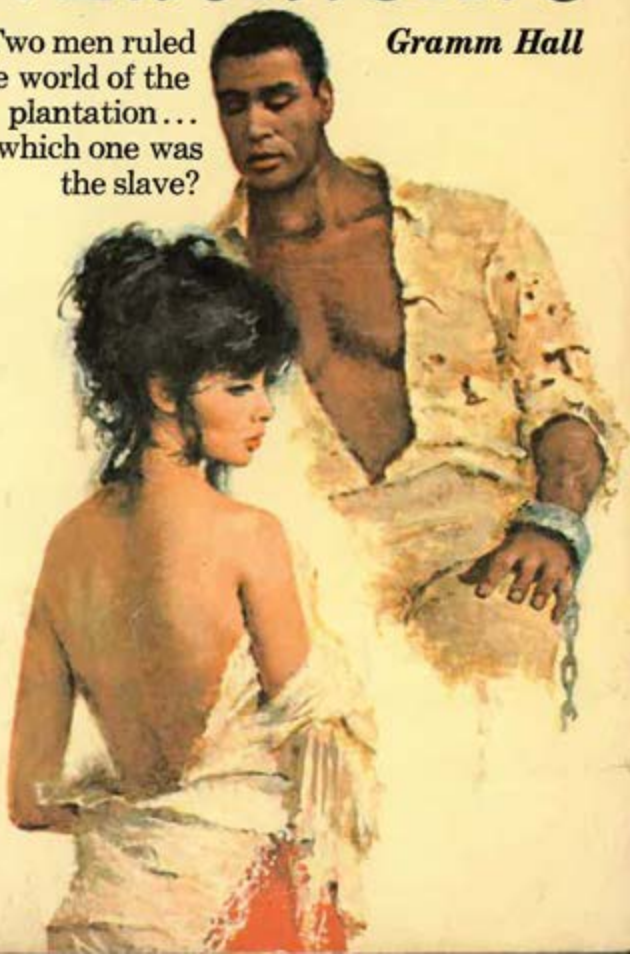


Never Before Published

# Machismo

Two men ruled  
the world of the  
plantation...  
but which one was  
the slave?

*Gramm Hall*



# BUCK!

The man called Mula was a giant among slaves, only an inch or two less than seven foot. He stood tall in his pride . . . and taller in his hatred of the ancient enemy, the white man who was now his legal master. For Merritt Frazer had made him a slave, just as he had been responsible for the death of Mula's mother. The Ashanti giant had once owned a name other than Mula, but his master seemed determined to blast it's memory from the slave's soul, as if the loss would finally bind the black to white in chains far stronger than those of white man's law. The giant was a prize possession, but he would be far more valuable if there were no thoughts of rebellion simmering in his mind. The two men faced each other, locked in mortal combat, each determined to prove that of the two he was the only man. And only one could win!

A LANCER BOOK—NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

Cover printed in the U.S.A.

## THE GOLDEN STOOL

was the throne of the Ashanti kings. Without it, they were as men among men. With it, they ruled with a power said to have been handed down from a hundred or a thousand generations.

When the slavers raided from the night, their goal was Prempeh, King, and the Golden Stool. With the king as prize, they could claim to be a military force acting under orders from England. Without Prempeh, they were only slavers, hated, dreaded, villified . . . but enormously wealthy.

This time they were to know a partial success. Prempeh turned out to be a doddering old man, crazed with fear, not worth taking as dog meat; and the Golden Stool was lost to the invaders. But they did win the prince of the Ashanti, a boy only twelve . . . but destined to become the greatest man his tribe had ever known!

# Machismo

*Cramm* FLAAR

LANCER BOOKS



NEW YORK



**A LANCER BOOK**

## **MACHISMO**

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# MERRITT'S BOOK

## *Chapter I*

Merritt sat in a plain wicker chair near the cold Franklin stove, his tall, broad-shouldered, and lean as a broadax body leaning slightly forward, his brawny hands resting lightly upon his knees. With the exception of two brief interruptions he had been in that position for more than twelve hours, but there was still, in the lines of his immobile figure that which suggested desperate expectancy, incessant alertness.

At eleven o'clock that morning he had risen from the chair by inches, tiptoed to the window and, gently pulling aside the thick velour curtain, had looked out through a chink in the closed shutters to glance at the grim, hard giant of a man chained to the rough post outside. Not a board had creaked. There had been no sound. Not even so much as the scraping on one part of his clothing against another. In spite of his stealth, the black eyes, swimming in vast pools of clear, milky white, had swung defiantly around to his study window.

Again at five o'clock in the afternoon, creeping, a master of silence, he had repeated the pilgrimage and had seen the same mask of ebony hardness, completely void of friendliness.

On the far side of the dusty pine-beamed room was a door. Beyond that door were Queeda and Asha, two of the young women who had arrived with the black buck. He knew they were there. How he knew it he could not have explained. So far as his trained senses had been

able to discover, there had come from the next room during his long wait the sound of neither voice nor motion. He simply felt that they were on the other side of the wall.

He had acted on the supposition that they would do what thousands of others of their kind had done, tense up like wild animals ready to spring to the aid of their buck-man. He had figured that if he kept them there near the chained black man, he could accomplish the same thing.

As he thought of this deduction on his part, and its result, he experienced the greatest excitement he ever allowed himself to feel. It was only a question of minutes, at most not more than an hour, before he would feel the rise inside of his breeches come in contact with the warm, dewy, taut inner recess of each wench. He would make the black giant look upon the scene, tormenting him to a sexual frenzy; and the infamous Ashanti tribesman, with his socksure mannerisms, would find that Merritt Frazer was still his lord and master.

He did not like either of the girls or Mula, or the manner in which he had obtained the trio. They had not been in the lot he had purchased the week before from Commodore Louis Aury. It was too late to make the long trek back to the St. Johns River; and besides, when you deal with a smuggler you have to expect dishonesty. He longed for the days when he did his own trading off the coast of Africa. He felt cheated of his prize at the very time when the entire plantation expected him to produce the fantastic new stud-man he had been boasting about. Mula?

If he had waited a lifetime he could not have had a better stud-man than Mula, but he had not been the buck that Merritt had purchased. That was the point that rankled. Granted, the Carters and Finells would never know the difference. They lived in a different world. Mula would be well integrated into the life of Meral before Clare Carter or Porter Finell would pay a shuffling, stammering call on Merritt. Normally, they visited the plan-



tation only once a year, during the selling season. The vastness of Meral kept them at a four-hour ride distance. They never needed to know the difference. But he knew, and Mula knew.

He could easily hide from the Carters and Finells the fact that three days ago the new buck had taken a single look at him and his young body stiffened and the shoulder and neck muscles became tight bands of shimmering black rope. He was gone before the black guards could release their leather whips from their belt cords.

For three days the search for the runaway had spread out into a mighty web of dogs and men. It was one time that Merritt wished that he employed white guards at Meral. His was an unusual plantation, founded on trust and not the bite of the whip lash. The other blacks had pursued Mula to calm his fears, not to do him harm.

Now, with the return of the captured stud, he would impose his regulations, and give them all a taste of the consequences of an attempted escape. He sat in the cold dark room and calculated the details of every move he had to make to obtain the right effect.

Mula! Merritt's lustful desire for the virginal sisters subsided as he again contemplated the powerfully built Afro. He was an inch or two under seven feet, and he moved with a prideful thrust of the shoulders, head majestically erect, and a fixed stare which made you think of a charging whort-hog. His voice was deep, loud, and tinged with the mark of his British training. His manner displayed a kind of noble self-assertion that can only be inbred.

Since twelve-years-of-age he had been just Mula—nothing more. He had, of course, another name, but Merritt was anxious that it not be uttered at Meral. To keep him incognito was not to hide a personality but a fact. A fact neither man could ever erase from the past—Merritt Frazer had been responsible for the death of Mula's mother and his bondage into slavery.

The room was very cold. Merritt wanted to shiver, but checked the impulse. In all the time he had been there he

had not moved a muscle unnecessarily. The darkness was in the shuttered, curtained room like a tangible, palpable object. It seemed a solid, oblong formation against which the glare of the bonfire beat in vain. And the silence outside was almost as bad. Even the dancing bonfire, mysteriously fed by black hands reaching out of the darkness, refused to crackle or roar or throw its dim light beyond the chaining pole. In that vast, moving, vital pineland plantation the fire was a separate thing, unchanged and unmoved by the ordinary uproar of the forest. The silence began to get on his nerves, until he mentally took hold of himself and assured himself that there was nothing uncanny in the affair. He would not again allow himself to believe that the black man possessed supernatural powers. This was something different. It was simply a matter of one man sitting silent and unmoving in one room, and another man equally silent and unmoving chained outside. It was a ritual; a power struggle. An Afro ju-ju game played for hundreds of unseen eyes.

The silence was so deep that he at first did not comprehend the rythmical hand-clapping. He lifted his head and listened, the years rolling away as an image formed in his mind—black heads attached to black bodies, the slits of white eyes in the dark, and the glistening of oily skins. This is how it had been the night he had first met Mula, but then it had been the sound of drums. Hundreds of drums that vibrated the close, windless night air. Hundreds of hands lightly touching the taut drum heads again and again and again. Then came the silence. A marvelous stillness predated the Coomassie plain, and the stars seemed to blanket the distant mud hut village with an assurance of everlasting security.

The Fanti came in a single line over the crest of the hill, spread out, perhaps purposely to make their numbers seem double. They, like the Ashanti, were Akan people. "Bloody buggers would sell anything for a few cattle," said a voice.

Merritt smiled without looking around. He knew that the English speaking voice was Spragge's. It was a flat

statement, but to his well-trained ears, incredibly trained, it had in it all the characteristics of British greed. The little, shrill-toned man's African company would profit from exchanging a troublesome tribal king for a few heads of cattle. As though reading his thoughts, another voice spoke in the Tshi tongue.

"You won't get Prempeh." The Fanti chief's whisper was like Spragge's, slow and heavy.

The agent grunted. The silence closed in again. The chief presented a broad back; it was the Fanti's trick to appear pointedly unaware of your existence during a raid on one of his own villages unless it suited his purpose to turn and glare before he let his forces loose upon the sleeping, unsuspecting village. Now he emitted on a sulky grunt. Merritt knew that this meant that it was the moment for attack, or for further negotiation for additional cattle. The mentioning of King Prempeh had been the key.

Spragge said crisply, "The thing is, Jabel Kurku, we need Prempeh captured to make this look like a British military operation and not just another bloody slave roundup."

Kurku looked away and Spragge continued, "Do you fully understand?"

"Yes. I know and the Ashanti know. They know that we are here. Their drums have told of our coming with the light-skinned ones for many days. They are a proud people, the Ashanti. They cannot believe that we are here to do them harm. They are a thinking people, sir. Tonight they will count our fires. If there are many, they will wait for daylight and our attack. By then, light-skinned one, Prempeh, the Golden Stool, and the queen mother shall have been sequestered somewhere down the Volia River."

The drums in the village had started again; there was in their beat a tense message of expectancy.

Kurku told them, "Prempeh has counted my fires. He is wise, the old fox. He is telling his people to think of each fire as if it were three. He has judged my force to

the last man. They make preparations for the morrow. For the right price you may have Prempeh tonight."

Merritt saw that Spragge had understood; his hands, which had been tightly clasped, relaxed. His sinewy hand opened and closed three times. Kurku gave a short frustrated laugh. Fifteen cattle—perhaps fifteen times fifteen Fanti warriors dying because of a night attack; but they were meant to die, they were only born for the purpose of battle, day or night. He was king of the Fanti, they his chattel; to live or die as he directed. Going to the butte edge, standing a moment, coming slowly back, poking his spear into the night sky were all part of the game; but it was settled, and they all knew it.

"Bit like old times," Spragge said to Merritt, "isn't it?"

"Almost." Then he added, "But, the point is, it's the end of the line."

"Rather. Bit annoying, though. Those blue noses in Commons passing a bloody law against slavery cuts the peacepipe all right. I say, what's to become of the business?" He was looking mockingly at Merritt, knowing full well that President Jefferson had just signed into law a similar Federal statute for the United States.

"I shall survive," Merritt said, obstinate-faced, "or rather slavery shall. There will always be Kurkus willing to sell their neighbors into bondage, smugglers like you who are willing to skirt the fringes of the law, and if all else fails, I shall . . ." Merritt swallowed his words, his mouth remaining agape, as the whole plain exploded with a single shrill cry multiplied a thousand times. It was not a sound emitted in aggressive assault; it was a vocal expression of the joy of killing. The line of dark bodies became a ripple of movement, then a surging tidal wave that drove into the mud hut, encircling it.

Spragge's face was milky and his beady eyes became transfixed as he watched the Fanti advance. However, he always turned away at the moment of slaughter.

The Fanti broke fast upon the village. The first dropped to the ground with their spears falling ahead of them. The fire-bearers ran screaming onto their arched

backs, and were catapulted onto the hut roofs. A barrage of orange-tipped, flaming arrows sang into the inner royal compound; their hungry flames ignited the dry thatch. The main force used the growing illumination to shield its attack, while the reserve warriors stood against the skyline, filling their chests with air, and beating out a hollow death rattle.

The village was fully awake; screaming, scrambling for escape, dying. The surging fires cast their darting shadows on the hut walls. Merritt raised his spyglass only to glimpse a young Ashanti warrior emerge from his hut; his bulbous mouth opened to spread the alarm, only to have it twist into a groan of agony as a toothed spear entered his head, separating even further his wide-nostriled face. It was a time for animals—beasts of the jungle preying upon each other.

And it was over as quickly as it began. As the two white men entered the black world, there was smoke in their throats. So dense was the heavy pall, the smell of death and destruction, that Sprague fell. He knew that the worst was yet to come. He, and he alone, must now decide which of the captives were fit for selling; which he must mark for execution or exile. Again there was silence, broken only by the crackling fires. It was the silence that breeds the fear of death.

Merritt, exerting himself as if he alone had just done the entire battle, walked to the inner circle. He found himself balancing on his toes with each step, as if he were afraid of waking the dead and near dead. He hung in the silence light as a feather, exhilarated, yet his muscles were so tense that he looked, too, like a man supporting tremendous weight.

Quietly, with reasonable quickness, they reached the royal circle. King Prempeh, weak and small with age, was flinching under every thrust of the spear against his collarbone. Occasionally he trembled violently.

"The queen mother, and the Golden Stool!" Spragge called out imperiously. "Where are they? They are not here!"

As if by magic, the Fanti understood his excited English words; the enclosure was immediately filled with flying feet and excited cries. Men and women ran from all directions, and on the crest of the wave came more Fanti, forming quickly a circle round two silent figures.

Spragge, with gleeful relish, shouted excitedly to the Fanti warriors, "It is she, and her son!"

Two of the warriors rushed the two forward. The firelight illuminated the fear in her dark eyes, but could not diminish the regality of her stance. Within her arms she carried the Golden Stool, said to contain the soul of the Ashanti nation.

In that pale and uncertain firelight she was barely visible, for she blended with the darkness, was a part of it, and part of the bare and silent world surrounding the village. Her quietness was its quietness; its stillness hers; its ebony hues were as those in her face and garment; its austerity and dignity and restraint were her own. She was not overly tall, as Ashanti women run, but her slenderness had in it such serenity and pride that she appeared to tower over the boy at her side, although he measured close to her eye level.

Her dusky and serene face was oval, and the color of well-polished saddle leather, delicately touched at the lips by a rosy shadow. This tenuous color was repeated in her bared breasts, somewhat sagged, but beautifully shaped. She regarded the spellbound Merritt Frazer with an expression which revealed her chilly pride and breeding. She was the queen mother, first of the many wives of King Prempeh, womb that had born the first prince, sacred to the Ashanti.

She excited him enormously. Merritt had been watching the queen mother ever since she'd entered the circle. She was far from his contemporary; barely old enough to have mothered the youth at her side. She seemed to be surrounded by a sensuous glow, something he had detected in only one other black woman. A chance at having her display even more of her body excited him.

He was partially turned toward her, and the firelight

illuminated his thick, pulsing manhood plainly. He hauled her in close to him, unmindful of the warriors, or the twelve-year-old prince, and his trembling hands pressed over the dusky nipples of her rounded breasts. His desire was obvious, and her eyes told him that she would rather die than submit to his advances.

Animalistically, he took her oval chin and turned it roughly from side to side. The next moment Merritt found himself rolling on the dusty field, a wild-cat clawing, tearing, pounding at his face and clothing. His head crashed into the Golden Stool, sending it rolling away from them. Merritt felt an instability of mind, a loss of focus; rational thought was almost beyond his reach.

It was Spragge who pulled the boy off the stunned man. Rising, his face contorted by deep humiliation, Merritt, bursting into wild hysterical laughter, ordered the boy's arms chained.

Had he not been caught off guard the resulting massacre might never have occurred. The impenetrable face of the young prince, looked at his own deadly pale one.

Nkumula Prempehumasi was first born to the Ashanti. The barren village was his only world—a world that had now been invaded and the special status of the queen mother violated. In the instant the white man approached his mother, his childhood fell away from him, and in him sprang adult hatred.

He glowered as the white hand lifted away the *kufi* skirt; his youthful muscles fought against the bracelets and chains as the invading hand stroked the never-before-seen ebony thigh of his mother. His anger boiled to near madness as Merritt brushed the tight curls concealing the royal crotch; and as Merritt unleashed himself, plunging sadistically into the queen mother, the youth split the air with an Ashanti curse, pounding the chains so hard against his wrists that they turned the metal to wet scarlet.

But neither Spragge nor Merritt understood the cry. They stood there glaring. Then everything happened at once. The Ashanti laid down their lives for the queen

mother, pressing in for the hand-to-hand kill so rapidly that the Fanti could not raise their spears. Merritt was torn from the woman's cove, pushed aside, and strangely forgotten. The Ashanti voiced the war cry of the tribe, but only to see to it that the queen mother was not violated.

When it was over—and it took the timely arrival of the reserve Fanti force to quell the uprising—blood had been shed on both sides. The queen mother was dead at the hands of her own people, and some bright, enterprising citizen had made off with the Golden Stool.



## *Chapter II*

In the ten years that had passed since he had left the burning Kumasi capital, Merritt had not changed. The long, stubborn line of his jaw was the same; so was the suggestion of lion-like strength in his thick, stooped shoulders.

Unsmiling now, he was a man intent on his business, making no attempt to exult over Mula. He acted as if the cancer between them had been committed by the recent runaway instead of ten years before.

The same quality of imagination that had lifted Merritt above the rest of the slavers, was responsible for the feeling of indignation that possessed him when he looked upon any unwarranted brutality. The matter-of-fact slaver would not use cunning in managing the slaves. He would merely shrug a shoulder, whip them and move on. But Merritt was not matter-of-fact in his choosing and handling of slave stock; he was an artist. And the artist resents any imperfections, whether of the body or spirit.

It was the fear of this black spirit which had first turned Merritt against Mula. Oddly enough, although the youth seemed none too friendly to Merritt, it was the strange journey down from Ashanti land to the Atlantic which started their decade of conflict.

Travel opened Mula's heart and loosened his tongue among his people. His appetite was good, too, Merritt noticed. He seemed to have buried somewhere behind his

black eyes the opening episode of their acquaintance. But that remembrance could smolder like a smothered brush fire, ready to spring to life with the first breath of fresh air.

All the journey Merritt had before him those black, boyish eyes looking straight into his own; that young face, those capable shoulders, the open bronze forehead with the scarlet mark of royalty under the roots of clustering coarse hair, this appearance reminded him of the boy's mother; the frank aspect, the artless smile, the youthful seriousness—all foretold trouble for Merritt.

When Merritt would speak to the lad in Tshi, he talked soberly, with a sort of composed reserve, and with a quiet bearing that might have been the product of manly self-control, of impudence, of callousness, of a gigantic deception.

Once, as though saving him for some game whose time had not yet come, Mula saved Merritt's life by forcing him to drink an herb tea when Merritt fell ill from contaminated food.

Afterwards, in the slave compound at Sekondi-Takorodi, with time to think it over, it might have struck Spragge that there was "something fishy" in Merritt's refusing to purchase the boy; but of course he kept his doubts to himself. To him, the boy was the real prize—a future producer of a strong blood line. But there lurked in Merritt's background a superstition that the boy could only bring him bad luck. And besides, he told himself, his journey had not been designed for the purchase of Ashanti bucks, but for a harem of Ashanti virgins. He would gain mating bucks later in the journey.

Of all the Sudanic-speaking West African peoples, these Ashanti maidens were a rare prize. In the past Merritt had purchased Azande, Basa, Baule, Ibo, Mandingo, Nubi and Tvi peoples, but King Prempeh had always been successful in keeping his Ashanti kingdom strong enough to ward off invading tribes. Nor did Merritt intend on sharing his catch of virgins. The youthful, large boned, tall and strong maidens, with high-peaked,

firm, budding breasts and protruding feminine triangles would be the corner stone of his future. Each, before reaching thirty years, would produce ten to fifteen mahogany skinned suckers. Merritt knew that Ashanti women were infamous for the dropping of male offspring, and so his purchase of one hundred, fifteen to twenty year olds, and twenty-five seed bucks cast out of his mind the manner in which they had been obtained.

With his purchase safely aboard the 90-ton schooner *Lady Anne*, Merritt, light heartedly set sail for the middle passage to Gambia. It was March, and the weather was calm and beautiful—that glorious, sunny winter weather that creates its own charm. It lasted only until the schooner was abreast the *Arquipelago dos Bijagos*. In a matter of hours the soft wind blew into a gale. The *Lady Anne*, hove to, wallowed on the Atlantic like an old candle-box. It blew day after day: it blew with spite, without interval, without mercy, without rest, without regard for human life. The world was nothing but an immense foaming wave, rushing at them, under a sky low enough to touch with the hand and dirty like a smoked ceiling. In the stormy space surrounding the *Lady Anne* was as much flying spray as air. Day after day and night after night there was nothing round the ship but the howl of the wind, the tumult of the sea, the noise of water pouring over her deck, the cries from the slave area 'tween decks.

She tossed, she pitched, she stood on her head, she sat on her tail, she rolled, she groaned, and the sailors had to hold on while on deck and cling to their bunks when below, in a constant effort of body, and worry of mind.

No one ate, no one cared to eat. Everyone forgot the slaves, in a desperate fight to save the ship. The *Lady Anne* was dying. The ship was going back to the sea, piecemeal: the bulwarks went, the stanchions were torn out, the ventilators smashed, the cabin doors burst in. There was not a dry spot in the ship. She was being gutted bit by bit. The malice of the sea changed the longboat into matchwood. And there was no break in the

weather. They were a handful of humans caught up by an infuriated sea.

The sails blew away, she lay broadside under a weathercloth, the ocean poured over her, and Merritt did not care. He had forgotten what it felt like to be dry, to be healthy, to be upon firm land. He fought his nausea until he was too weak to fight any longer.

What day of the week it was, what hour of that day, he would never be able to recall—all that came to him over the howling storm was the chant of human voices. At first he thought it just another of the fanciful dreams brought on by his weakness, but this dream had sound that grew in intensity.

"What the hell?" Merritt gasped.

"A ritual, dear lad," Spragge intoned, drunkenly from his bunk, taking another healthy draw on his gin flask.

"You dirty bastard!" Merritt screamed. "That's a damn coronation chant! You lying, soot-eared, red-coat; you told me you'd sent the lad into exile with his father. He's aboard, isn't he? They're making him a prince in exile."

"Naturally, love. He'll fetch a handsome price from some bugger interested Moslem at the end of the middle passage. Surely, you didn't think I'd be stupid enough to turn him over to the troopers in Seko? I leave that kind of sentiment for you colony boys. But don't worry, old boy, I've been listening to them for hours; it's the storm that has them bug-a-booed. It can only be controlled by a man with power. It's not so much a prince they are making him as a witch doctor."

"Shut up!" Merritt screamed. "Because of him there will be no end of this passage. That black devil doesn't need power to stop the storm, because he brought it about. He'd rather see us all dead than have his people go into slavery."

"Really now, Merritt, that is rather far-fetched, I must say. You cross-over boys listen a mite too much to those witch doctors' mumbo-jumbo. How can a twelve-year-old lad harm you?"

"Fuck you, you sleezy flesh peddler! Get your arse out of that bunk and throw him overboard."

"Like hell, yank! It's your fairy-tale, you exercise it."

"He's your responsibility."

"Not so, deary. It's your friggin' ship. If you check with the captain you'll find that I've paid for his passage to the station. As a passenger aboard your lovely little excursion boat he's your responsibility; you see that he gets to his destination safely."

The argument continued, but Spragge persisted in clinging to his berth, stupidly, from sheer fright of the storm—like an animal that won't leave a falling stable in an earthquake.

Merritt had no recourse but to do the deed himself. It was chancing certain death, since once out of his berth lashings he was exposed as if on a raft. But he went. The deck cook-house was shattered as if a hurricane had exploded inside. Most of it had gone overboard—stove, men's quarters, and their property, all was gone.

A portion of the passageway to the hold remained as if by a miracle. Merritt groped in the ruins and came upon the near smashed entryway. The guard, surrounded by foam and wreckage, sat jabbering cheerfully to himself. He was out of his mind; completely and forever mad, with this sudden shock coming upon the fag-end of his endurance. Merritt snatched him from the iron-barred door, lugged him aft, and pitched him head-first down the cabin companionway.

Cautiously returning to the slave area he used the keys taken from the maddened guard to unclasp the multiple locks. Every ounce of his spent energy was consumed in forcing back the water swollen panel. His stomach revolted at the odor of human waste that rushed forth from the putrid quarters. Animal eyes peered from the darkness, but the chant did not diminish.

"Quiet!" he ordered. The chant continued. "Where is he?" he bellowed over the musical cadence. "Where is the boy?"

"I am here," a voice came serenely from deep 'tween decks. "What do you wish of me?" The quiet manner in which the question was asked infuriated Merritt. He could not see past the unchained women, let alone into the deep cavern where the men were shackled on their backs.

"Come out!" he commanded, realizing the stupidity of his order even as it was uttered. "You've brought this upon us," he hurriedly blabbered to hide his previous words. "Stop it! Stop it at once."

The laugh unnerved him. It was the sound of a twelve-year-old boy not fully comprehending the adult words; but Merritt took it as a further sign of his supernatural power over the elements.

"What am I supposed to stop, *master*?"

"Stop this infernal storm."

"I am no God."

He fought to cry out the boy's full name, but all that would escape his trembling lips was the final syllables of the full phrase—"Mula!"

"What was that?" the boy questioned.

"I . . . I called you Mula. Is that what you wish to be called?"

"Yes." He hesitated. A deathly stillness came over the slave hold. "Will you call me that always?"

"If you wish."

"Say it again."

"Mula."

To the Sudanic speaking people phrase had a meaning unknown to Merritt. It was a word reserved for the use of kings, masters and chattel owners. It was rarely used, except for a ritual of the highest order.

Nkumula Prempehumasi—one who lives free as the son of our king—could scarcely believe his own ears. The white man was telling him that he was granting him freedom—mula.

"And again."

Merritt screamed out the shortened name again and again.

The chant took on a different cadence.

"Do you wish the storm to be over?"

"Yes. Oh, God yes!"

Wishing to believe the white man, Nkumula spoke to his people. The chant softened, and a chill ran over Merritt Frazer—as the Ashanti people quieted, so did the howling storm. He backed away, fearing even more the boy's power, and vowed to murder Spragge if he didn't get rid of the boy at the Gambia River station.

The storm eased before morning; the next day the sky cleared, and as the sea went down, the leak in the ship became apparent. When it came to bending a fresh set of sails the crew demanded to put into the nearest port. Really there was nothing else to do with the boats gone, decks swept clean, cabins gutted, men without a stitch but what they stood in, stores spoiled, ship strained. And again it was the boy's power, Merritt claimed, that brought about another miracle: by mid-day the mouth of the Gambia River was spotted on the horizon.

"Hallo!" Spragge greeted Merritt cheerfully as the wide channel was breeched. "I thought you said the devil had us for sure?"

Merritt was in no mood for joviality. "I want it understood, Spragge, that the boy is to be off this ship before it sets sail for America," he snarled. "I fully realize that MacVicar-Tyne has allocated half the passage room to your British company, but I'll be goddamned if I will let you include that. . .that. . .warlock in your shipment."

"Sorry old boy," Spragge snickered, "out of my hands, you know. I'm only responsible for the capture and middle passage. Porterhouse is the agent in these waters. Cheer-o'."

"Come back here, you black blaggard!"

"Can't tarry, old dear. The *Cristabol* has her sailing flag flying. I must get back to my own station. You'll find Porterhouse something else, again."

But finding Porterhouse among the river island slaving stations proved to be as monumental a task as having the *Lady Anne* repaired by the African shipwrights. The

schooner had spat out all the oakum of her lower seams during the gale. Endless weeks passed as she was recaulked, recoppered and made tight as a bottle.

Spragge disappeared onto the *Cristabol*, leaving Merritt with the chore of securing food and retaining quarters for his charges, which still included the boy. It was this day by day contact with the boy's questioning eyes that nearly unnerved Merritt. It was only when he had resigned himself to giving up the whole bevy, rather than including the boy, that Porterhouse arrived down river with full power to change the cargo.

He disgusted Merritt on first sight. He had grogg-blossoms all over his face, an indomitable energy, and was a jolly soul, especially when he discerned Merritt's malcontent.

The boy, washed clean and wearing a tattered loincloth was brought to a stuffy sitting-bedroom behind the slaving office. Before Merritt's startled eyes the obtuse man removed the simple cloth covering from the boy's waist. Great goblets of perspiration sprang out of the enormous shaven head as he took hold of the slender cylinder of manhood, rolling the foreskin in his oily palm, nodding approval when the penis stood up tall and hard. At first the boy did not understand the reason for such an inspection. When the rose-bud of dark skin was roughly forced back over the purple-black cock-head full realization dawned and he screamed in terror; twisting his bound wrists so violently that his wounds were reopened.

"Pity," Porterhouse sneered, smacking his slobbering, purple veined lips together, "these people have such an abhorrence of circumcision. Look, Merritt! Look at this member on the lad, and only twelve years old. Think, man, of what a stud he will be by eighteen."

Merritt diverted his eyes. It disgusted him to see a man fondle the private parts of a boy, especially a black boy. He thought of his own twin children, Alvin and Alina. They were the same age as this lad, and he would kill any man, black or white, who would as much as dare lay such a lecherous hand upon them.



"Why don't you leave him for the wenches?"

"Wenches," Porterhouse roared. "Blimey, man, even now he's split the majority of them wide open. We'll have to fit him out properly each time, or sell him to a large mouthed Arab," he giggled sadistically.

"Really, Porterhouse," Merritt blushed.

"Can't take it, eh, man? Funny! Thought you to be a man who had seen lots of this side of the world. Shame he isn't already cut, takes time to heal. It's alright, though," the older man leered. "I have good doctors out here in the bush. The boy will be circumcised before he's shipped over, and that's all you're worried about. He won't be on your ship, *Mister Frazer*. Now, old boy, he's off your hands, so . . . ah . . . if you don't mind. . . ah . . . I'd like to inspect the lad further . . . in . . . ah . . . private."

Merritt turned to flee the foul living quarters of the degenerate, but a set of black eyes froze him in his tracks.

"Mula?" the boy pleaded.

"What?" Porterhouse started. "What's this he's saying," Porterhouse demanded, alarmed.

"Mula?" the boy repeated. "*Taski regulo mula!*"

"Goddamnit, man, the boy is saying you have given him his freedom. That you intoned the required word six times."

"What word?"

"Mula!"

"Nonsense," Merritt interjected, hurriedly. "It's the boy's name, Nkumula. He is mistaken. I've called him by that name six hundred times, but it doesn't mean I've granted him anything. Good morning, *Mister Porterhouse*." Merritt fled before the boy could be put back in his charge, the horsey laugh of Porterhouse ringing in his ears.

As Porterhouse contemplated the right market for his prize, the lad stared at the closed door—the door he felt would be freedom, a return to his father, his land, to his people.

The idea he had been cheated in his quest for freedom started as an imperceptible germ; it forced itself through his grey-matter and oozed in slender threads, in an invisible film, in an incomprehensible manner. It made its way into his muscles, into his bone marrow, poisoning the inner reaches of his body until there was nothing left but the hatred it had generated. He would submit to any torture devised by the huge fat man, but he would survive; for his life was now dedicated to seeking out and destroying the man who had taken away his freedom.

### Chapter III

The *Lady Anne* swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had subsided, the wind was nearly calm. Bound down the river, the only thing for her to do was to wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of Gambia stretched before Merritt like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the colored sails of the slave barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in clusters of sharply peaked canvas.

"We'll make it on this tide, Mistah Frazer," said the captain, looking to seaward.

"I can feel it in my calves."

"Right you are, laddie."

Between them was the bond of the sea. The captain affectionately watched Merritt as he scanned the luminous estuary.

"Funny, ye didna' follow the sea, laddie."

Merritt laughed. "I spent my days afloat, Captain. It was too sedentary a life. Your home is always with you—the ship; and so is your country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same."

"Land. You Irish must always put your stock in land. We Scots are wedded to the sea."

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was like Captain Barlow to pinpoint a man's nationality. It was accepted in silence. Presently Merritt said, very slow:

"I was thinking of very old times, when I first went to sea, fifteen years ago—the other day. . . . My father was Gaelic, and a stouter man would be hard to find. His original folk were Celts, Picts and Erainn. He could trace the line all the way back to the Connaught kingdom, if that matters much. We have as much hate for the English as you, Captain. They confined the Frazer clan to the barren Connaught province. It split our family into two warring camps; the British confiscated the land and gave it to my father's half-brother, who was Protestant. It looked to be pauper prison for the lot of us. My father was a rounder, though. He packed the four of us boys off to Liverpool town: Douglas he dispatched to Australia, Edward to New Zealand, Valerie to America, and, with my father's hand as my last link with parental protection, I was sent to sea. A year after first sighting of a sailing vessel, I was hardened into the ways of seafaring men. I learned to mend sails, square a rigging, and a hundred other shipboard chores imposed by frugal Scottish captains who threw little away and mended everything in sight.

"It didn't take me long to learn that few sailors ever grow wealthy. I would hang around the shipping offices, noting the passing world of commerce, and the comparative earnings in the shipping of "dry" and human cargo. Four years my ship moved through the sea-lanes to the ports of the old and new world, and it was the new land that caught my imagination. What was there left for me in Ireland? My sisters were all married out, my parents gone. No one ever heard from Doug or Edward, and while in America I learned that Valerie had been killed by Indians in a place called Kentucky. Have you ever seen Savannah, Captain? I saw it for the first time in 1784. What a jewel."

He broke off. The incoming barge traffic had ceased upon the sleepless river. There was nothing else to do until the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said, in a hesitating voice, "I suppose that was the day I turned back to the land."

The cool, bracing air of the September day was like wine. He was drawn from the city to the land. The dew was yet heavy on the tall grass by the roadside and the southward winging birds could not match the song singing in his heart.

At a dusty settlement he stopped to refresh himself. The storekeeper was Irish, a man who had gained a new beginning in the valley.

"Mostly mine," he told Merritt. "Traded for goods. Best land, outside of Erin, but it's not tamed."

Out of courtesy he asked how much the land was.

"Don't rightly know, son. Nary a soul has offered to buy, only to sell. It takes living on land to make it of value. You fixing to settle?"

"Hardly. I'm but fifteen. I still have two years before the mast."

"Slaver?"

"Mostly. We carry other cargo as ballast."

"Do you have any money, boy?"

Merritt, trustful of all, untied a leather pouch from his waist. Its contents represented two years of frugal saving: the equivalent of ten dollars.

The storekeeper counted the coins carefully. "I reckon that gold is gold, although, the likes of these 'George's' aren't so popular since we won our independence. But, lad, seeing that you are Irish; for this, I'll sell you six hundred forty acres of Ogeechee River land."

The statement stunned Merritt. His life in Ireland had been measured in single acres, not hundreds at one time. He heard the "Yes" burst from him like a cannon report. Then he laughed, and cried. He had bought land, more thumping land than his family had ever possessed. Good land, the storekeeper had said: "rich, river bottom land."

He looked off to the southwest, to where his land lay: unknown, untampered with, left for awhile yet to the animals and remaining savages. Two years of sailing lay before him, then back to his land.

He grew in those two years. Grew into a tall man, handsome, and tough of muscle and skin.

Once back at sea he began to notice the shipboard slave agents; notice their clothing, his own dress and speech, and to compare them, one to the other, for business acumen. In this manner he learned the inner working of the slave trade. In every port he felt the stirring of his youthful male blood, but he would not squander his money on prostitutes.

Merritt always had a warm regard for all women, even the slave women. He had been so divorced from their femininity, during his long years at sea, that their very sight dazzled him. One day, on his next to last voyage, he was hit hard by a girl getting out of a carriage in New Orleans.

It was the sailors custom to line the rails and watch the carriage trade pass on the wharf. It was a harmless habit and there was always the chance of seeing a well-shaped ankle alighting from a brougham.

In the Spanish controlled port Merritt had been befriended by the slave trader Jacques Dunoyer. He raced along the rail until he spotted the stocky little Frenchman at the foot of the gangway.

"Jacques, my friend," he called. "Who is that paying a visit to your slave pens?"

"Where, *bon ami* Merritt?"

"There. The one with the rare classic beauty."

"*Oui, Monsieur,*" assented the slaver. "She is *magnifique*. But Monsieur, she is also my daughter, Jeanmarie." He rolled out a booming good natured laugh. "Today, leetle sailor, you smell like the Mississippi, but tonight, with a proper bath, I think you smell more like a handsome man. I think that Jacques invite hees leetle friend home to supper, no?"

Up till then Merritt had had little time for women. But he knew suddenly, for some reason, this was different.

The fiery little Frenchman controlled the slave trade in the Spanish governed—French dominated—city. To his mind—which was a constant cauldron of intrigue—the Spanish *invaders* possessed no man capable of being his

son-in-law. In the handsome seventeen year old Irish sailor he sensed a man of promise.

"I know thees land around Savannah, it is good land. Six hundred and forty acres is a fair beginning, *bon ami*."

"Someday it shall be as great as some of the plantations I've seen around Orleans."

"For a man—a real man—there are only three essentials in life: land, a good woman, and children. I have been reduced to only one—Jeanmarie."

During the initial courses of the dinner Merritt perceived most clearly the effect of manners on the fairer sex, and was led to lament most deeply the plainness of his own seafaring ways.

Over cognac and coffee Jacques Dunoyer observed: "My boy, you have the inbreed essence of a gentleman. When you are moved, I'm sure that you can play the part with dignity and spirit."

Merritt was moved by Jeanmarie. On his second invitation to the house on Royale Street he played a very close game with the daughter of the house; avoiding pointedly to be alone with her, which she took at the time for an effect of decency, but later thought to be a most insidious courtship; meeting her at meal-time only; and behaving, when he did so, like an affectionate brother. Up to the hour of his sailing Jacques had scarce directly interfered between the young couple; except in so far as he had maneuvered them together.

A mysterious fire aboard the *Excellent Flower* destroyed the crew quarters and delayed sailing by a month; a month in which Merritt found himself the house guest of Jacques Dunoyer. A full month was all Merritt needed to strike up a meaningful friendship with innocent Jeanmarie; so that they were always together, hand in hand, or she climbing on his knee, like a pair of children. Under this influence Jeanmarie's old reserve melted by daily stages. Presently there came walks in the long shrubbery, talks in the gazebo, and moments of tender familiarity. It was plain to Jacques Dunoyer that his

daughter's feelings developed to a more moving nature than the sisterly.

"You will observe," Jacques began seriously, on Merritt's last evening, "we have grown most fond of you. My life is reduced to but a single challenge, the happiness of my daughter." He laughed, "You see, my friend, I have only one recourse in securing a son."

The blood came up in Merritt's young face. "I think this is not a very wisely chosen moment, Monsieur, for such a discussion."

"Do not deceive yourself, my boy," Jacques returned to a serious tone. "I shall not let you take her straight away to marriage. You must first prove yourself. You have an obligation to fulfill at sea; then land to clear, a home to build, crops to plant. Jeanmarie can never be a backwoods wife; you must develop a suitable surrounding to place her in."

"Sir! I had thought such a discussion would be held by us in private. Not in front of Jeanmarie and . . . ah . . . strangers."

"Strangers? Ah, I see. I've wondered when you would question me on Yorie sitting at the table with us. Yorie is no stranger to the Dunoyer family, Monsieur, she is almost another daughter. Jeanmarie and Yorie were brought into this cruel world on the same day. It was also a sad day for us, as Jeanmarie's mother was taken from us that evening. My daughter shared the same mother's milk as Yorie. When you take my daughter from me, you also gain Yorie. However, Merritt, let me make myself quite clear, she has been granted manumission. She is Jeanmarie's companion, not slave. When the day comes for Yorie to fall in love and seek her own family I shall not stand in the way."

There was a faint rustling in the spacious room and a door closed quietly. The young mulatto girl had left.

Merritt studied his mind to frame a picture of the girl. She had been present at all times, but his mind had been centered on Jeanmarie. At first the only image was of



large brown, disquieting eyes. He could not help but admit that she was as beautiful as Jeanmarie, but with softer, more sober lines. Dawn and dusk, he thought: Jeanmarie of the golden morning rays, Yorie of the soft afternoon shadows. And a curious thought struck him forcefully—never once had she spoken to him.

There in the queerly lighted room, where the bed lamp tube sputtered with picayune mischief, and, a tattered shutter, three quarters torn from its bracket, was at odds with the peeking, full moon, Yorie, in the constant shadow patterns, seemed womanly, indeed a veritable-writhing, churning substance imbued with a single supposition—gratification.

The girl pulled his hairy arms to her shoulders, saying: "Com' on now, *mon*—" now whispering, "no need to fear . . . give ole Yorie some fresh stuff. Com' on and have a good time. As I'm to be yours one day, why not get to know me now?" Merritt moved his wine clogged head into the cradle of her neck. "That's right, *mon*, you let little Yorie soothe your troubles. I seen yah kissin' in the gazebo. I seen yah put your hand upon Miss Jeanmarie's breast. I knows she's sparkin' for yah, but ain't fittin' for you to cut her till ya'all are wed. My, you ain't had it in a long, long time . . . but we'll fix that."

Pitying him . . . she was pitying him . . . this little mulatto creature . . . this almost slave . . . pitying Merritt Frazer, young, white, handsome, virile, free. A wise man for Yorie to know . . . and then forget.

She had been in his room upon his return from the garden. The wine, she insisted, had been sent by Monsieur Dunoyer. Merritt was not used to the volume of drink he had consumed on this his last evening. His blood was already running rich from the nearness of Jeanmarie, and he suddenly didn't want to be alone.

Her voice was soft, melodious—tinged with the humming bird slur of the Creole. She talked of Jeanmarie while keeping his arousal at fever pitch. Beneath the

clinging dressing robe he knew her to be nude. The wine quenched his parched throat, sending new fumes to his head.

His world spun. Soft hands helped him to his bed, tenderly prepared him for bed, prepared him for what he never dreamed was possible. Warm human flesh nestled close, urging him to use the rounded breasts, downy belly and taut thighs as a mattress.

He rocked with the rhythm she created, building his manhood to a power long forgotten. His breath came hot, rancid with wine, frantic into her face. She followed the natural trend of his sudden rejuvenation, grinding her hips to gain full knowledge of his greatest pride—an abundant genital.

"Oh, you're good," she whimpered . . . his beat took on an added power. Yorie was so engaging, sexually winsome and disingenuous that she charmed away his memory of her color. He faltered, but with blithe banter, gay encouragement, she returned him to expansive turgidity.

Quickly she built her biological surge to its own point of dispatch. Primitive, natural in all her emotions and reactions, she, involuntarily, put into words their actions. He shuddered, then responded. From another they would have seemed cold, peremptory, pornographic . . . hurtling from Yorie's mouth they were gusts of salacious delight.

The dewy lining scraped his stiffness, the words boiled his blood, her hands kneaded his body to a screaming, panting, quivering, uncontrollable climax. He rolled away, his mouth agape, making the coil springs creak in anguish.

Merritt lay exhausted, a wet cloth covering his deflated penis, watching her nimbly don the dressing robe. To his wine dilated eyes she was transformed into something elfin . . . boyish . . . a will-o'-the-wisp loce sprite. Her hair was short, deep brown ringlets held tightly to the skull by the perspiration of her recent exertion. The eyes were alive, flashing brown-black, all-seeing, and hiding a snub of a nose that almost wasn't; she had boyishly

rounded cheeks, a small living mouth, white even teeth, and a chin that was firm, determined. Her throat arched slenderly, and her small perfect-circle breasts and supple waist were like a child's.

"Do you understand who I am to become?" he asked.

"Naturally. It was wise for you to know me before Jeanmarie."

"What do you want?"

"I've already had it," she laughed.

"No money?" He was incredulous.

"Don't insult me, Monsieur. I am no woman of the streets. I was born here," she continued. "Not in this house, but on the Dunoyer plantation. The man who is to me like a father said the New Orleans was Spanish and the plantation was French. We were happy on the plantation, Monsieur, and that is why I look forward to seeing your plantation."

"It is still a dream."

"It must be a very real dream for M. Dunoyer to take such stock in you. He is a proud man, if you haven't noticed. Your young eyes have been blinded by love and have not seen that this house has been mended and patched to give an outward show of elegance."

"Does he not still possess the plantation?"

"It is gone. When we were ten years old there was a bad hurricane. When it was over the plantation was no more. Most of the slaves had been drowned, the fields under a lake of muddy water, the house, barns and slave quarters washed on down to the gulf. It was then that we came to the city. What slaves that were left helped M. Dunoyer establish himself in the market."

"You were not sold?"

"No, Monsieur, I was not. You do not sell what you love. I must go now."

"Wait!" But it was too late, she was gone. Gone as suddenly as she had come.

Merritt knew that he was no longer drunk, yet everything in the past hour seemed to have detached itself from his past consciousness and made it fly away. She had

come from another world, another existence, but had managed to snare him into intercourse. He cringed at what he had just done. It was alright for the other sailors to cut the dark meat, but never Merritt Frazer. He was not a hypocrite, but it was Yorie and not his future bride who stayed in his brain like a dull knell. He lifted the various pieces of information one by one and studied them. Reluctantly he put the pieces into a logical order: she had seduced him on given orders. M. Dunoyer? Jeanmarie? Did it matter? Who can say how she came to his room. She was suddenly there, flask in hand, walking to him, the door shut behind them . . . her ingenue childishness dropping from her as quickly as her dressing robe. She was all woman. Yorie!

With swinging steps Yorie returned to her room.

"I take it," sneered Jacques Dunoyer, "that the length of your stay bears out my conviction."

"It bears out nothing, Monsieur." Then a more terrible temptation beset her. "He did not touch me."

"Then he is not the man I took him to be."

"No. He is a gentleman."

"Suitable for Jeanmarie?"

"Most suitable."

"Shall I stay the night here, or do you wish to come to my room?"

"Tonight I am tired, Monsieur. We must be up early to bid our guest *bon voyage*."

"I shall miss you, Yorie. I shall miss you very much when you go to Georgia."

"It shall be many years, I fear."

"They shall pass quickly. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

The door closed quietly. The house was asleep. Yorie stood gazing at herself in the full length mirror. Only a shade of skin coloring separated her from Jeanmarie, and yet, she had possessed him first. For the first time she had beaten Jeanmarie, and there was a way in which she could bind Merritt to her forever, one tie that would be

indissoluble: she would make his flesh cry out for hers; make his desire a burning torture, his need for her irresistible. For seventeen years she had stood in Jeanmarie's shadow. To take something away from the snobbish beauty assailed her with all the violence of her fervid imagination. Her plan was a long way off, but when Merritt took Jeanmarie as a wife, he would also be gaining a steady mistress.

He sailed from New Orleans a young man in love. He was an ardent young man and earnest in everything he did, so falling in love was like planning his land or learning about slaves, something he took to heart and worked hard at. That love would lead to marriage he knew. But with the marriage would come Yorie. He refused to accept his dual loves—one of the spirit, the other of the flesh.

Emotions are separate, he told himself. Why worry, for God's sake. Jeanmarie is not Yorie. Yorie was a hundred yesterdays ago. Jeanmarie was tomorrow. We do what we have to do—and move on. On that last voyage he saw it again and again—the sputtering lamp, the dusty room, and Yorie beneath him on the bed. His guts cried out for the one, his heart for the other.

*Come on ship, Merritt cried silently, we're of the same mold, you and I: enjoying the turbulent toss of the ever-changing sea but longing for the comfort of a safe harbor. If you can share a double mistress, old girl, so can I. Hurry me home.*

## Chapter IV

The slaving frigate *Excellent Flower* was out of Dakar bound for Savannah. Every morning the sun, as if keeping pace with the progress of the slaver, emerged with a silent burst of light exactly at the same distance astern of the ship, caught up with her at high noon, pouring the concentrated fire of her rays on the devious purposes of the men. The white crew on board lived amidships, isolated from the human cargo. The awnings covered the deck with a white roof from stem to stern, and a faint hum, a low murmur of sad voices, alone revealed the presence of a crowd of slaves upon the great blaze of the ocean. Such were the days: still, hot, heavy, disappearing for Merritt one by one into the past, bringing him ever closer to his future.

The nights, black and smouldering, descended on the ship. The bustle of daily activity kept the sailors' minds alive and the evening stillness eroded even the most content.

"Mis-tah Frazer!" A voice shouted in Merritt's ear. "Are you, or are you not, third mate on this passage?"

"Aye, that I am, sir," he stammered.

The monstrous bulk descended in haste and stood still on the deck. "An' are you not the officer of the watch?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Then, looky here, mis-tah! You have no forward watch." The skipper had a great stock of words and could shout, nor did he mind who he shouted at, either.

"Find your intrepid crew, mis-tah, and get their lazy arses back on duty!"

There were two cabins on the *Excellent Flower*: the captain's and one for the shipping agent. This passage the second cabin was reserved for an Austrian. Scuttle-butt had told Merritt where he might find the wayward sailors. He flung open the second cabin door without ceremony.

"On deck, Fielder. To your post, Randall!"

Merritt saw the older man lift his head from his cards so sharp that his nose-nippers fell off. He clutched the pasteboards to his chest as though Merritt was going to snatch them away. It was almost comical.

"*Herr* Stouffer, Captain Farnsworth does not allow gambling aboard his ship."

"Have a heart, matey," a broad-shouldered youth leered at him with an air of jaunty imbecility.

"I might have, Kramer, if you'd not taken men from their watch. Now you've gotten the old man looking up all our asses. Break it up!"

The verbal row that burst out in the narrow cabin was so awful you could hear the cursing on deck.

The young chap making no movement just stared at Merritt. This was Merritt's first view of disobedience, it must be put down quickly or the voyage would be a merry-mucker.

There he stood, clean limbed, clean-faced, firm on his feet, and as angry as though he had caught them testing each other's corn-hole.

He glared.

"Friggin' capt'n licker," the sailor said from some strange inability to hold his tongue.

Merritt's thick carcass trembled on its legs that were like a pair of granite pillars; he trembled from head to foot. With sudden speed he caught the youth by his collar, pulling him from the bench and flipping him over his head into the passageway. "I said move, sailor." Merritt kept his back to the door, eyeing the wiley Austrian of gross red face.

"I am well aquaint with the captain," the Austrian snarled.

"Likewise," replied Merritt.

"Bah! You make Gottam fuss for naught. Why not be my friendt." He lifted his huge head and looked at Merritt with sullen and passionate impudence.

"I must get back to my post."

"You tam' Amerikans are all alike; just like dese cattle we carry, restless. Do you not enjoy the life?"

"At the end of the voyage."

"Ha! Don't fool me. You sailors are all rogues. What is your sport . . . the cards?"

"I never play."

"I vill teach. Sit!."

"It's against the Captain's law."

"And is money againdt yours?"

"No." Merritt did not like the man, but there are times when a man must act as though life were equally sweet in any company.

"If not zee cards, my friendt, what is your pleasure—drink? . . . zee black women in zee hold? . . . somezing different, perhaps? Zat is it . . . perhaps you'd care to return after your watch . . . alone?"

Merritt was outraged. The insidious little man had openly propositioned him. He fought to control his anger.

"No thank you, Herr Stouffer, I don't think we have anything in common."

"That's vat they all say before they try."

"I don't think we'd better try." There was no mistaking the sinister tone that crept into Merritt's voice.

"Why make a tam' fuss? You'd quickly push your pecker into one of dese black wenches, is dat any worst?"

Merritt lunged.

"Get back! Don't you hit me." He squeezed his two hundred plus weight against the bulkhead. "Hit me and I'll take away your verfluchte certificate. I shpit on you." He spat. "I vill play my game until ve become to



Amerika," he cried, fretting and fuming and shuffling his feet as if to free his ankles from some invisible and mysterious grasp that would not let him get away from that spot. He looked sick at Merritt's refusal, and it was odious. Merritt had seen other men who have been found out, not in a crime but in a moral weakness. He could stand it no longer. With a parting curse he returned to his post.

But he could not close the scene from his mind. During the following days he quietly polled the crew, man by man:

"And how much have you lost?"

"Tis on paper only, sir."

"A debt is a debt. How much?"

"Me whole bloody slavin' bonus."

"Did he try anything . . . ah . . . else?"

"Oh, that, laddie. Sure, he's a fuck-mouth."

"Can you swear to it?"

"Swear to it? Matey, I see, I feel don't I? Stood in line, I did, whilst six popped into him afore me."

Merritt learned two facts that disturbed him: the number of men who had lost their entire earnings to the compulsive gambler, and the number of the crew who had stood before the kneeling Austrian.

"Good," roared Captain Farnsworth, upon learning his men had lost heavily at the hands of the slave agent. "Cards are the handy work of the devil. Concern yourself naught with them, my boy. They are tramps, vagabonds, knocking at the door of your mind, each taking a part of it."

"This has nothing to do with them directly, sir; only the agent and the good of the ship. Is he to be left to his winning ways and the perversions of . . ."

"God will do punish to wrong-doers."

"I am a God fearing man, Captain, same as you. But can God help us in the long weeks ahead? Once he has won everything that is to be won and used his mouth to its limit to sate his gratification, what then? These men will begin to realize that their entire voyage has been in

vain. They will become surly, dissident, a wild, angry mob. We shall be the ones responsible to hold back the mutiny, not Herr Stouffer."

"I see the point, Mis-tah Frazer." His bushy-bug eyebrows closed into a solid line. He liked Merritt. He was the kind of mate you would leave in charge of the deck—figuratively and professionally speaking. "What would you have me do, lad?"

"I am not a card playing man, Captain. But many's the night I've stood by my father's side, in the pub, while he enjoyed a few friendly hands. Several of the men have told me that they have never seen a man draw to so many aces. I don't know how he is cheating, but he is a cheat. Begging the Captain's pardon, but I've noted the he keeps in his cabin a cribbage board. Would it have a deck of cards with it?"

"It would."

"And would the Captain be possessing a new, unopened, packet of cards?"

"Aye. That I would."

Merritt quickly outlined and won approval for the plan he had formulated.

It was not so easy to win back the confidence of the rather fat man. Merritt wanted to see him squirm for the honor of the craft, but not in exchange for his male virginity.

Late one night he spotted two figures on the aft deck, and they began to move slowly towards him. They chatted together as they strolled. Merritt saw that one was Herr Stouffer; and as to the long individual with grey moustaches he was the chief engineer, and in various ways a pretty notorious personality. The Chief gazed in an inanimate way between his feet as they came abreast.

Stouffer lifted his head, opened his mouth with an extraordinary, sneering contortion of his full puffed face "Good eve, mein *third* mate. Still carrying tales to Herr Capitano?"

"Have any come back to your ears?"

"But zee men have said . . ."

"Have said that I have talked with them. Who has said that I have talked with Captain Farnsworth?"

Stouffer was incredulous.

"None," he puffed.

"Nor will they . . . as long as the rules are not broken on my watch."

"Are you now on watch, mein friendt?"

"No."

"And what does your own personal mind say about breaking the rules during someone else's watch?"

"Certain rules be damned, but not those that would be alien to my own personal moral code."

Stouffer's thick, purplish lips came together without a sound, and then a thought seemed to strike him. "Would you care to join us for a game of cards?"

He went off to his cabin in a resolute waddle, not waiting for an answer. Merritt followed at a lackadaisical pace.

"What cards do you play, Mister Frazer?"

"None. I've often watched my father play brag."

"Is goot. Brag is a round game of cards from which the game we play was developed. Do you recall the rules of play?"

"Not really," Merritt lied. As the Austrian laboriously took Merritt over the value of the hands, Merritt checked every point in his mind, having read up, the night before in the Captain's cabin, in Chambers's Encyclopaedia on the round game of poker.

The game began slowly, Stouffer even allowing Merritt to win a few of the smaller pools. By mid-watch the chief engineer was out of the game, replaced by two younger sailors who still possessed credit in their account. If Merritt drew to a straight, Stouffer would go better with a full round of cards or straight flush. As the sky turned to dawn, Stouffer's fist, as dumpy and red as a lump of raw meat, continued to gather in the winnings.

"It is my watch," Merritt reminded the players.

"Then the game is ended," Stouffer smiled weakly.

"Only postponed, *mein herr!*"

Four consecutive nights the battle continued; shipmate players coming and going until only Merritt sat opposite the Austrian.

"May I remind you of your kind promise, *mein herr?*" Merritt said at the beginning of the fifth night of play.

"My promise?"

"Yes. We agreed that should I win, you would not pay me in Austrian *ducats* but with slaves from the hold."

He answered a little curtly: "But you have not won, as yet, *mein friendt.*"

"But I shall!"

"Ha! Dat is what I like, confidence."

"And what I would like is a fresh sealed pack of cards."

"But these are quite adequate, no?"

"No."

"But I do not know your English cards."

"Little difference, Herr Stouffer. Your's employ hearts, bells, leaves, and glands. We also have the hearts. Bells are diamonds, leaves spades, and the acorn gland is very similar to our clubs. If I am able to learn your form of Austrian poker, surely, it will be a trifle for you to convert to English cards. Here is a fresh deck."

"But . . ."

"Five cards, Herr Stouffer."

Without the crutch of his own playing cards the Austrian seemed to falter. Hand after hand ended in favor of Merritt. When Merritt would draw to a favorable hand he would chip to fill (equal to twice the ante). Stouffer began to perspire from every pore.

"I'm extremely sorry, *mein friendt,*" Herr Stouffer puffed out of sweating lips, "but I find our delightful excursion becoming most costly. Perhaps another night."

"Play!" Merritt snarled.

The air in the cabin became oppressive. Word of the turn of events spread through the ship like a plague. The cabin and passageway became clogged with the idle curious.

Time and time again the silent watchers would hear Merritt mumble "Go better." They breathed as one, no one speaking, no one moving—all intent on the clicking of the shuffling cardboards, the slow deal, the mumbled betting.

Stouffer tried to limit the raise, a rule he had never before enforced. The grumble of clearing throats backed him quickly from such a demand.

"Make good the ante."

"Chip to fill."

"Go better."

"Full."

"Straight."

"Triplets."

There was a pause. Then Merritt said, smiling, with his eyes fixed on the Austrian and in a voice which he alone could hear: "I think this will end the card playing, *mein freundt*."

"Goot! I am ruindt."

"Crap! You've only lost a few slaves, and what you gained illegally from the men. If I may have my cards, I'll wish you a pleasant voyage."

"I think I'd care to examine the cards most carefully."

"Oh? Shall I also have the Captain examine your cards, Herr Stouffer?" There was no answer. "I am sure that you'll keep your promise and that you'll let me come with you to select my winnings. It would be better."

"For whom? For you, you mean?"

"For you, too, I assure you. My shipmates would love to learn of the manner in which your cards are artfully coded. It took me several nights of playing to smell out your game."

"And your cards were similarly marked?"

"That's where you are wrong, sir. You spent so much time trying to read something into the backs of my cards that you just played damn poor poker. You were beaten by your own inability to play the game of chance without cheating."

Stouffer colored slightly but did not reply, shook hands with a few sailors around him and wished all a good night. To Merritt he merely nodded his consent.

Stouffer remained within his cabin for the remainder of the voyage. It appeared he was under some hazy apprehension as to his personal safety and would trust only his personal Chinese cook-house boy. The sparrow-boned lad kept the Austrian well supplied with bottles of rum, and meals when he would eat. The Chinese lad would do anything for the obese man without question. Merritt was never able to learn what immoral obligation held him to the Austrian, but he could surmise.

The landing at any port is an excitement. This landing, for Merritt, was an exhilaration; he was coming home to his land.

His duties as third mate kept him occupied throughout the unloading of the cargo. He did not question the absence of the agent; he had no reason to worry—he had already selected ten women and five bucks. When the slaves were off-loaded, marched to the sizing pens, then he would go to claim his winnings.

Captain Farnsworth was jubilant—two hundred forty head left Dakar; two hundred and twenty were safely deposited on the Savannah quay. It was a record, considering that most runs felt profitable with a fifty per cent mortality rate.

Farnsworth was reluctant in saying his adieu to Merritt; he respected the lad's honesty, his seamanship, his moral fiber. He was the cloth that made sea captains. Try as he might, he could not pull Merritt's heart away from the land. Merritt rushed from the ship as though she were sinking, never looking back.

The gigantic barn-like structure was sickly humid. Four ships had arrived that day, crowding the wooden pens to an unbearable degree. A thousand unwashed, jungle clad bodies, filled the air with an acrid, eye burning aroma that was sweetish to the naked nostrils. Brawling, shouting, cursing clerks prodded, poked and examined

each black. Regardless of family, kin, or native tribe they were segregated into specific pens for mass auction.

In the bustle Merritt did not at first feel panic in not finding the Austrian. But when he had made three full circuits of the sizing pens he began to curse his naive stupidity.

"I beg your pardon." Merritt tried to catch the attention of one of the burly men sorting out the slaves.

"Not now."

"Would you know . . ."

"I'm busy, tar."

"All I want is if you can tell me . . ."

"Can't tell you a thing, sailor, till I gits dese niggahs sorted out."

Merritt could see that if he waited for the task to be completed he would be standing with his thumb up his ass for several hours. He started back towards the *Excellent Flower*, hoping, against hope, that Captain Farnsworth might be able to give him a clue as to the whereabouts of the Austrian.

"Meestah Flazel," the skinny, toothless Chinese boy caught at his arm. "You no go back to ship."

"Why, Chang?"

"The old fat one fly away like witch on bloomstick. He says to Chang, 'Take sailol man to pen. Keep with slaves till he bling genelal and sold papels.' But is tlick, I say. He goes to get men to plove you take flom him with calds what is not yours. No go back to ship. Him makee big tdouble."

"Do you know where my slaves are?"

"Yes. I takee."

"No. Tell me where they are. Then you shag your ass back to the ship and tell Captain Farnsworth what he is up to. Make the Captain hold him and the authorities there until I can get the slaves away from here. Savee?"

"I undelstand. But what of Chang Fong?"

"What of Chang Fong?"

"I am palt of slaves."

"Oh, no. I didn't pick you are part of the bargain."

"No, he did. I makee fine cook."

"You makee fine fast ass trail back to that ship. When you tell the Captain, then you come back and let me know what Stouffer is up to."

Following the Chinese boys instructions, Merritt found the three by five foot manger of rough hewn planks far back in the huge structure. The light was so dim that Merritt could scarcely count the number of bodies cramped within the stall.

He shut his eyes, more in anger than to let his eyes acclimate themselves to the gloom. He felt a burning flame in his bowels. The small grouping of slaves were the cast-offs, the sickly, the dying. The ten women were far from virginal; one, even then, ready to drop a sucker. He had honestly won five stud-bucks; the three he could see were so emaciated he could count their ribs at forty paces, even in that interior darkness.

"Senor," a timid voice came from the darkness. The speaker was a small young man built like a sapling pine, with broad shoulders, no hips, and an unruly shock of glistening black hair. His eyes too were dark, and held by turns the gentlest and the harshest, the most friendly and the most satirical expression on his rather placid, pale brown face.

He bowed to Merritt, and said: "I speak lettle *el ingles*, Senor, *sin acento*." Spain lay thick on his tongue, although Merritt would learn he was a master at English words when they suited his purpose."

"You're not black!" Merritt stammered.

"No, Senor. I am Orlando Diaz of Madrid; by profession a Spanish sailor, by misfortune a captive of Berger pirates, by worse luck sold to the *Aleman*."

"Incredible!"

"Perhaps. Life *es dificil*."

"Why?" Merritt asked aloud. "Why were you cast with this ungainly lot?"

The Spaniard's smile was reserved and uncommon "I am deaf and dumb, Senor. Or, I was until I arrived in



*norteamericana*. My people are of no love with the Moors or *Aleman*. The Arabs fear the man who has no sound or hearing, thinking him to be one who knows the secrets of Allah. I therefore was deaf and dumb and did not die like my shipmates. The fat one is not so superstitious, but is a smart businessman. A deaf and dumb does not bring such a high price, no?"

"And what of your people?"

"I am . . . how do you call it . . . *slatero* . . . *solo familia* . . . unwired . . . my only family."

"Unwed."

"Si, Senor." He basked Merritt in a winning smile.

"But how can I keep you, you're not black." Nor was the Chinaman black, Merritt considered.

"Skin does not make the slave, *patron*. I am happy to be purchased from the *Aleman*. To be in this land is to be free. To be on land is to be free of the sea. I will serve you well and with all my *veintium anos*."

"Your what?"

"My years, senor." He labored to go so high upon his fingers, finally shrugging away the difficult task.

"These here your coons?" A sharp voice demanded of Merritt.

"Yes!" he replied without hesitation.

"Then get them to hell outta here. There's another ship just been sighted. I need all the room I can get."

Merritt made a quick decision. "This is my man," he indicated Orlando. "Where can he take them while I go for a wagon?"

"Down aisle ten to the loading ramp. How many you got?"

"Thirteen, plus him and a Chinese boy."

"Where's he?"

"Picking up my gear from the ship."

"Your sure trustful, man. Here's your clearance for the lot. Now, let's get them over to the loading area."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Merritt nearly screamed as he clutched at the offered release paper.

It was an odd little company that arrived on the banks of the Ogeechee River. Their first home, for master and slave, was a tent made from second-hand sail cloth; their food bore a hint of the oriental. On the second morning the pregnant black woman gave birth to a boy, under a sprawling cottonwood tree. Merritt took it as a favorable sign and called his land Cottonwood.

Had Merritt been used to being a slave owner he might have lost the entire entourage, but his heart was then still filled with human kindness and it so endeared him to the cast-off blacks that they fought for survival.

At first, Orlando knew nothing about slaves or cotton or food crops and when, after he saw Merritt's barren land, he tried to train the three bucks as loggers and carpenters, he floundered helplessly like a misunderstood messiah.

Daily, Merritt would shake his head over the slow progress. He wondered what had possessed him into accepting the Spaniard. He laughed at his cumbersome ways until he saw the glint in his black eyes and he asked curiously how long he thought it would take to build Cottonwood. Orlando Diaz replied with stubborn conviction that it must not take more than two years.

It was to take them eight. Eight years in which Orlando became Merritt's trusted aide. His services during the terrific struggle to build Cottonwood proved invaluable. Merritt had been quick to discern that the Spaniard was a man of culture and possessed a mind of unusual power. More than once Merritt had called him to his quarters to pour into his ears his own grievances about their setbacks; and it was always the subtle Spanish wit who would go away from a reactivated Merritt.

The magnetic personality of Merritt Frazer had appealed to Orlando's Latin imagination from their first meeting. To him Merritt was *machismo*, a man among men; a male of unquenchable virility. Without Merritt his life would have been little different than the slaves whom he worked as overseer. With Merritt he was, also,

a man. Little did they hide from each other; everything they shared, even to the wenching girls.

It was a time for growing, in a growing land. Merritt would later boast that he, a land owner, had voted for the first President of the United States of America. He doubled, then tripled, his land holdings around Cottonwood.

And when the land was ripe with straight rows of popping white cotton heads; the driveways tree lined, the main house tall and stately and glimmering white; the slaves trained, happy and contented, he went to bring home his wife.

And a cloud came between the men of Cottonwood—Jeanmarie Dunoyer Frazer. To her mind Orlando was little better than any other slave and Chang a thieving oriental. Merritt solved the one problem by booking passage for Chang back to his homeland. Orlando was yet another problem. Even after being granted manumission he refused to leave Cottonwood. It was difficult for him to fathom the change that Jeanmarie brought about in Merritt. And later, when Merritt poured his heart out to his friend about the unhappy marriage, naturally, his mind was embittered against the lady of the house.

## Chapter V

She lay snugly in her four-poster with its ball-fringe curtains half closed to keep her warm against the bitter fall rains. She could watch the drops falling, through the crack left open in the curtains of the window opposite her bed. She could not sleep for sheer discontent.

Her thoughts went back to New Orleans, to the fun and excitement of the bustling city on the Mississippi. She had looked forward to her marriage to Merritt Frazer, feeling it would arouse a spiritual ecstasy, a sublime marriage of the flesh. She found nothing in it but unhappiness. It was not that Merritt could not afford to give Jeanmarie a luxurious life; he showered her with the unnecessary things women feel are essential—everything but neighbors and city living. She had become too accustomed to being an Orleans belle. To her, Cottonwood was a prison. She had no one to talk to, not even Yorie. Merritt had flatly refused to bring the mulatto to Cottonwood. Then a more restricting prison closed about her—pregnancy.

The real problem posed by her condition was the need for her to send for Yorie. Merritt could not restrain her in her demand. On the one hand his groin longed to once again see the fair mulatto beauty, but caution held his tongue. Jeanmarie was stubborn, spoiled and proved to be a witch with the household servants.

"How is Hannah working out?" he asked.

"*Working* is a poor word to couple with Hannah. She's lazy, slovenly . . ."

"Oh, all right. Once I recognize an error I rectify it. I'll have your father send Yorie to us on the next boat leaving Louisiana."

She had kissed him warmly.

Yorie arrived long before it was time for Jeanmarie to lay on the hard cot in the plantation burning room. She arrived at a time when Jeanmarie was refusing Merritt entrance to their bedroom. The subtle girl used this denial to her own advantage, giving to Merritt what his natural needs were crying for most.

Another set of watchful eyes saw the looks that passed between master and slave girl, and it tore his heart apart. Orlando had taken but a single look at Yorie and knew he was hopelessly in love. A fiber of the rope of friendship broke each time he thought of Merritt and Yorie being together. He prayed for the quick birth of Jeanmarie's child, so that Merritt would not be free to sleep away from his wife's side.

"W-a-a-a-ah! w-a-ah!"

"It is a girl," the mid-wife exalted over the feeble wail.

"There's another one in there," Yorie cautioned.

"My God, not twins!" Jeanmarie whimpered. "I can't do it again. Do something, Yorie."

"I can't do anything, you must. Keep pushing," Yorie demanded. "He's coming out straight, so it won't take long."

"Him?"

"Yes. A son. Push, Jeanmarie, push!"

"Oh, God! Oh God, God, God! I hurts like hell. I can't do it, Yorie. I'm too tired. Kill it and pull it out, I can't stand it," she screamed.

"Shut up, you fool! Knead the belly, Lolly. Help push him down past the breech, the feet are almost out."

"KILL IT!"

"Don't stop, child. *Force* it!"

"I won't! I won't! I don't want the damn brat. I didn't

want any child. Oh, my figure will be ruined. Why did Pappa marry me off to this backwoodsman."

"Knock her out!" Yorie commanded.

"What?" The colored woman backed off in alarm.

"Hit her on the chin to knock her out. She's going to fight us and close off the umbilical chord. We've got to relax her."

"Ah don' know nothin' bout hittin' white folk, missy," the woman wailed. "She'll sell me down river, fur shur."

"Get out! You're worthless to me." Yorie doubled her fist and hit Jeanmarie squarely on the chin. It took a second and third blow from her small fist to make the birthing mother relax her taut muscles.

Defly the mulatto pulled forth the wrinkled mass of reddish skin, tied and cut the chord and gave the child a resounding slap on its pear shaped behind. It did not respond. Again and again she spanked, praying for the slightest wail.

"Oil!" she demanded of the cowering mid-wife. "Hot oil!"

The tiny lips were already turning blue when Yorie pressed her own mouth onto it, pulling with all of her might to clear the small throat passage.

Once, twice, three times she pulled away, spitting out a milky fluid. With her hands she motioned for the mid-wife to rub the hot oil over the child, as she pushed her own air in and out of the small lungs.

"Quickly, that basin of cold water." She raised the boy-child by its heels, preparatory to another swat. "Throw it! Throw it all over him!" There was a weak gasp as the water hit his small nude body, then Yorie struck; leaving a red welt on his behind, but she didn't care; he was filling the room with his overwhelmingly male cry.

Merritt was boyishly jubilant. He ordered a festival for all the county. He kept bringing Jeanmarie gifts: a lace shawl, a pearl necklace and emerald-green brocade for a gown. He acted like the first man who had ever sired twins.

"Honey, you're not dressed yet."

"No, and I don't intend on getting dressed."

"But, honey, most everyone's arrived for the festival. We've got bar-b-que, peach ice cream, and real fireworks when it gets dark."

"Bosh! Merritt Frazer you're a clod. You think a woman can give birth to *two* babies and jump right out of her bed."

"I've already put the festival off twice, because you didn't feel up to it. It's been six weeks, Jeanmarie."

"Six weeks . . . six weeks," she mocked. "How do I know it won't take me six years to recuperate. Alvin almost killed me Merritt."

"Yorie said you did fine."

"Little she knows. Did she suffer the pain? Has she ever had a baby, let alone *two* babies at once. Oh, I'm so miserable," she sobbed.

"Come on, honey. What's the trouble?"

"I thought you'd never ask. You never seem to spend any time with me, and what with my facing the greatest tragedy of my life."

"What's so tragic."

"You're cruel. Don't you read the letters from my father."

"Of course."

"Well, he's *remarried*, Merritt."

"I know. I think it's wonderful."

"Wonderful! Why, Merritt Frazer, everybody in Orleans knows that Rhoda Mallery has colored blood in her. I'm ruined! I'll never be able to go home and face my friends. Pappa has disgraced us."

"Tommy-rot. There's probably more colored blood in each of us than we'd care to acknowledge."

"Merritt Frazer, you shut your mouth! Why . . . why, I'd kill myself if I thought I had the least amount of darky in me."

"That's neither here nor there. Come on, now, and get dressed." He was exhausted from her constant grumbling.

"I said I'm not coming to your silly party. I don't want to associate with a bunch of niggahs and farm folk. Why can't we live in Savannah, Merritt, where we could go to real parties. And while we're on the subject of Savannah, Merritt, it would be a much wiser place to raise twins than here on a farm."

"You raised the subject of Savannah, I didn't. This is not a farm, it's a plantation; it's home." Merritt turned livid with rage. Was there nothing he could do to make this woman happy?

"Oh!" she gasped, falling back onto her pillows. "I think it's my heart. Call Yorie, sweetheart."

And again she took to her sick bed to gain her way. Carriage after carriage of doctors were summoned from Savannah throughout the winter. Each was sympathetic, but advised Merritt, privately, that there was nothing organically wrong with his wife.

The arguments became interminable, forcing Merritt to stay away from his wife more and more, and spend more and more of his time in the bed of Yorie.

As the spring plows turned back the rich, red earth, Merritt allowed Jeanmarie to go into Savannah for a week's shopping and for a doctor to examine the twins.

Leaving the hotel Jeanmarie came up short. "Why, I do declare, if it isn't Prentice Hunnicut."

"Why, Miss Jeanmarie. If you aren't a sight for sore eyes. Your Pappa said you was livin' near Savannah, but I never reckoned to see you in the city."

"Oh! Why, I come into town most every week to pick up a few odds and ends. The plantation isn't that far out."

"How nice."

"And how's everything at home? How's your father, the doctor?"

"Everything is just fine, Miss Jeanmarie. Father will ask after you, I'm sure. I'll be going home to Orleans on the next packet. Shall I ask after your father?"

"Why . . . when was the last time you were home, Prentice?"



"Most onto a year, Miss Jeanmarie. I've been in Africa on a slave mission. Right handsome profit I made, too."

"Then you know Savannah?"

"Most assuredly. I keep a residence here, full time."

"How nice," she mused. He hadn't been home, then he couldn't know about her father's recent marriage; and he knew Savannah. "Yorie, you and Big Sam take the twins on to the doctors. I think I'd like to chat a spell with Prentice Hunnicut."

They were constant companions for the week; sight-seeing, riding, sharing intimate dinners, and looking for a house for Jeanmarie to rent until Merritt could build her a proper town-house. From the handsome Orlean gentleman Jeanmarie learned of a way that would force Merritt into letting her live in the city.

As the spring rains came in greater measure she readied her trap.

"May I come in?" Merritt asked.

"I'm awake!"

He ignored the curtness of her tone.

"I assume," Jeanmarie began, in a prepared statement, "that you don't run from delicate matters."

"Can there be delicate matters between a husband and wife?"

"Most assuredly! There is the question of protecting other people, third parties who cannot necessarily speak for themselves," she said and regarded him darkly for a moment. "I will not raise my children in a house where it is customary for the master to sleep with the slaves."

Merritt began laughing. It was quite a terrible noise, mirthful and cantered.

"However," she stopped him short, "that is not the full reason why I asked you to come to *my* room. I wish for you to build me a home in Savannah. I will take Yorie with me so that you are kept from further temptation."

He stared at her angrily, his face red with embarrassment. Trembling with rage, he told Jeanmarie that her notion was groundless. He demanded that she bring his accuser before them.

Tears smarted into her eyes. Perhaps she had been wrong to listen to Prentice Hunnicut. Perhaps Merritt was not the type of slave owner who played with the colored wenches. But she could not falter. She had to run out her feeble bluff.

"I have eyes, sir, and ears. I refuse to take no for an answer. Yorie did not refute the charge when confronted, why should you," she lied. "I'm giving you every opportunity to keep this from turning into a proper scandal. You will set me up properly in Savannah."

"You know, of course, I cannot afford to accept such a proposal. This is the first year that Cottonwood will produce to a degree to make us rich and powerful. I can not strike down one thing to build another."

"I will have it no other way. I cannot abide this country living for another day."

"Is that all it means to you? You'd ruin everything to appease your selfish wants."

"I ask only to save my good name."

"Damn your good name! What of all I've strived for?"

"You should have thought of that before you crawled between her legs."

"Damn you!"

"Damn me all you like, Merritt. I shall live in Savannah. If you're so afraid of not having sufficient funds, why not go back to slaving? You're rich enough to charter your own ship."

He stopped pacing and turned to her. "And what of our marriage?" he asked in steely tones.

"Build my house and I shall see."

Jeanmarie Frazer.

What a difference the passing years had made. To both of them. The house in Savannah became a shell for her to protect her narcissistic feelings. She fell so much in love with her own face and body that she couldn't stand having to share it with just one man. Although Merritt was seldom in town, he was the envy of almost every man in Savannah, married or single, young or old.

As the years stretched out there were many Prentice

Hunnicut's for Jeanmarie, but Merritt was blind to her philandering. He was swept up in the world of commerce; building Cottonwood into a regional empire, purchasing shares in Mac Vicar-Tyne slave vessels, and becoming a commanding force in the fight for state's rights.

"It can't go on," John MacVicar told his dinner guests over brandy. "The Barbary pirates have taken three of our vessels in as many months. We can't afford to suffer further losses in the slave game."

"If the President gets his way it will soon be illegal."

"People will always find ways of securing slaves."

"If cotton prices stay at ten cents an acre we won't even be able to afford slaves."

"What do you plan on doing, Merritt? You've been hit hardest of all." His host asked.

"What? Oh . . . I'm terribly sorry. My mind was far away. Do? First, gentlemen, I shall do as I did last year and recommended to all of you. I shall once again plow under my crop rather than sell it at such a ridiculous price. Secondly . . . John, what are the *Lady Anne's* sailing orders?"

"She's being fitted for a run to Amsterdam."

"I want her, John and I don't want her sailing orders changed."

"I don't follow you, Merritt."

"We've lost quite heavily, and I don't think it is by accident. I've had communication from the British African Company that they will soon have their hands on the Ashanti people. I want to personally take the *Lady Anne* to Africa, but let it appear that she is on her way to Amsterdam. I think one of our own people have been selling us out."

"Preposterous!"

"I don't think so. You gentlemen have lost ships; ships can be replaced. I have lost human cargo—over a half million dollars in human cargo. I can't afford to lose gain. There are six of us in this room; I advise this information go no further. If I do not return, and end up on

the pike end of a pirate's bully, then you can look to each other for blame. This may be the last chance we have of bringing in another load of slaves; I've got to take the chance."

Reluctantly, they agreed.

Jeanmarie studied Merritt carefully throughout the carriage ride to *her* house but he withstood the scrutiny without flinching.

"You miserable cur," she flared as soon as they were within the front door. "How could you do such a thing? For years I've plotted to get into Savannah society. I'm not invited out much, you know, because my *husband* is hardly ever in town. You treated me like a stranger tonight, and every one of those she-cats noticed it. This is not what I planned of our marriage?"

"Can you plan marriage, Jeanmarie?"

"Yes!"

"No, simpleton. You can plan its ruination, but not its growth. When did you plan to kill it between us?"

"What a stupid question," Jeanmarie's temper was rising. "Every person in Savannah knows you love Cottonwood and your damn slaves more than you do me."

There was no pity in Merritt's face as he looked at her and his words were harsh.

"I can't stand pity, my darling wife. Tonight I saw the pity in the eyes of my fellow business companions. At first I took it as a sign of our recent setbacks. But they didn't look at each other with the same hurt. Respectable men have a certain way of looking at women they admire, and those they loathe, even though they be most beauteous. You were loathed tonight!"

Jeanmarie started toward the stairs, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. Merritt ignored the interruption and continued. "Funny, how little statements said over the years do not fall into line until a man is confronted by his wife's lover . . . or is it plural?"

"Shut up!" she barked from the balcony.

"Oh, no, my dear," he raced after her. "Tonight I feel like regaining what is mine. You promised me children,

where are they? The twins are nearly ten. I shall be gone for a long time. I want a child upon my return."

It was the first time that Merritt had crossed the threshold of her bedroom in eight years. He reached out, shredding her gown with a single tear. She was too terrified to scream. Animalistically he tore and cursed until she stood nude. "Tonight, Jeanmarie, I'll make you forget your other studs."

## Chapter VI

Yorie Duncan emerged from the open carriage, glanced apprehensively about the bustling Savannah docks and walked swiftly toward the MacVicar-Tyne shipping office. But as she came to the chalked arrival board a small, ungainly figure bulked before her and a mild, pleasant voice brought misery where a moment before there had been contentment.

*"Buenos tardes, Yorie. Como estas?"*

"Good afternoon, Orlando. I wasn't aware that you'd be in from Cottonwood."

"But of course, senorita. *He* is coming home. Senora Frazer? The children?"

Yorie sighed resignedly. Too thoroughly a lady to display consciously her frank distaste for her mistress, she was yet too cunning a house-servant to wholly conceal it from the Cottonwood overseer.

"At home," she said thoughtfully, "with her sherry bottle."

Orlando felt a cloud sweep over the joy of Merritt's return.

The handsome mulatto woman only heard him say quietly: "He will expect to see the children."

For a while, she said nothing, but shook her head with a dissenting smile, which carried up the corners of her wine-red lips in a maddeningly delicious fashion. Then, she spoke, slowly and in measured syllables: "Some day—when I can tell my whole story—you will know what

Jeanmarie means to me. What little I have, I have because of her. If I ever attain freedom, such as you enjoy, I shall still be bound to her—yet, I sometimes think I would rather be dead than to be wholly white.”

She sat upon a cotton bale, the toe of one small foot tapping the wooden wharf below the skirt of her full gown, her brow delightfully puckered with seriousness. A shaft of afternoon sun struck the delicate honey color of her cheeks, and discovered coppery glints in her auburn hair. She was very tall, slim and wonderful, Orlando thought and out beyond the river harbor the late summer seemed to set the world for her, like a stage. She was a character in the drama of life—a product of both the black and white worlds, yet, accepted by neither.

“I understand your protecting her. But he is a man. A man expects to see his family upon his return from a long voyage.”

“I know. I know how he will feel,” she conceded warmly. But, then again, will he? He has changed so much. But there is one thing he always lacked . . . something you possess.”

Orlando raised his brows in challenged astonishment.

“It’s the one thing I always missed in him, because it’s the one thing I most admire—strength, virility.” She was talking more rapidly as her enthusiasm gathered headway.

“A man’s life is, in a way, a reflection of the people surrounding him. He can’t live a strong life unless he is strong himself. Merritt shows strength outwardly, but inside she had made him weak.”

Orlando felt his heart leap. He should not be listening to such talk, would not have eighteen months before. But it was something to know, that she believed he reflected a quality of strength.

“You and your master,” she went on, “are unlike in everything except your vanity. Can you fancy yourself running away from life because you couldn’t face the disaster of your marriage? That’s not gentlemanliness . . . it’s cowardice. When I was in New Orleans,

unwillingly went down the beautiful Japanese veranda and the lady, the wonder maker for herself, I was born in the Chinese house, I was raised with Jeanmarie. She is no different, after thirteen years of marriage, than she was as a spoiled five-year-old."

Orlando merely nodded and strode disgustedly to the water's edge. He was disgusted with the whole affair, and particularly that phase of it which had placed him, and Cottonwood, under the watchful eye of the ponderous and uncouth Jeanmarie Frazer.

"For the woman," he acceded, "I have as small respect as is possible, but for the master I have something like worship. I will listen to no further talk about him."

One could readily understand his antipathy. The husband and wife were as dissimilar in business matters as an idiot and a genius. Matter of fact, Jeanmarie had appeared wholly disinterested in the plantation. During their business encounters she would slouch in the drawingroom, staring through the window with great, fishy drunk eyes. Those eyes annoyed Orlando. Jeanmarie annoyed Orlando. She seemed incapable of vision. She was inhuman, stupid, reflecting no intelligence, to his way of thinking.

He was therefore astonished when he was summoned to the town house shortly after the news arrived of Merritt's impending return. He arrived at the fashionable mansion with a mind blank of definite opinion.

She rose with a rustle of her bombazine hoops to hide the fact that she had been drinking and approached Merritt's desk. She bent over it majestically. There, on the polished mahogany, lay the Cottonwood ledgers.

"John MacVicar has informed me that Merritt's ship will be delayed by a week to ten days. They are off-loading at St. Johns River rather than here in Savannah."

"That's still good news." The Spaniard was careful with his English when addressing Jeanmarie.

"Nothing to brag about. He deserts me for nearly two years, placing all these burdens upon my shoulders and you expect me to get excited over his return."



"We'll start picking before his return."

"I trust it will not be another ten cents to the acre year."

Orlando, being Spanish, found it offensive for a woman to be inquisitive about business matters. He answered with simplicity: "It shall be a good year. If not, I would have already plowed under."

Jeanmarie paused, gazed bemusedly at the desk, and settled herself comfortably on the settee.

"It has been very hard for you to like me. I can see that now. What was I? Nothing but an Orlean bride. Oh, how I remember the *gracious* manner in which I was accepted at Cottonwood. You had been with him since the first. It was no wonder you couldn't abide me; I was an interloper."

"I will not deny my early feelings, Senora. But once having married him, you should have made the best of it," he said, censoriously.

The light entirely left Jeanmarie's face.

"As you have made the best of being a slave?"

He stared at her, his eyes flickering with fire. Never, never once, had Merritt ever referred to him as a slave.

Jeanmarie continued: "And speaking of slaves, Orlando; how many are now at Cottonwood?"

"Near four hundred."

"Oh?" Casually, she poured herself a glass of sherry, never considering the offering of some to Orlando; she turned on the charm. She had a lot of it, and it always showed her New Orleans heritage and brought out the Creole in her voice. "I never believed in breaking the law, and why? Because it's too easy to get caught. I don't aim on losing everything because Merritt Frazer is bent on bringing in one more load of darkies. All Savannah knows what he is up to, and someone is bound to tell the federal authorities."

Orlando compressed his thin angry lips as he strove for a reasonable voice. "And how do they know?"

"It's the talk of every dinner party."

"With your gentleman escort being the first to bring up the subject?"

Jeanmarie said in a low voice: "I shall overlook that remark, for I have need of you. Sell half of the slaves before Merritt's return."

Orlando refused to beg for details as she had expected. He was too stunned. She stood up, a tall and majestic woman. Someday she'd be fat, and with her flowing golden hair and high-cheek boned face she'd be regal in old age. Even now, slightly intoxicated by the wine, she was still a striking beauty. "Orlando, I've always felt you hated me, but remember you were bought as a slave and could end up as part of the two hundred that I want sold. I really don't need you; I have gentlemen friends who could assist me with the sale."

"The same ones who have recommended that you sell at this time?"

A dull flush crept under the smooth surface of her skin. "That is none of your concern. I think it might be best to sell you off."

"Go right ahead. He would only buy me right back upon his return. But, you forget, you can't sell what you don't own. I am free."

"It's a shame that Merritt never had a great deal of formal schooling," she said sardonically. "It seems he never had your manumission recorded."

Orlando heard her words, but would not believe them. He drew up, haughtily. "Senora, he is my *patron*. I must await his return."

Jeanmarie made a tight knot of her lips. "I can't wait for his return. I want those slaves sold and sold now! Understand?"

"It is harvest time. The plantation has need of them."

"And I have need of the money they will bring."

"Senora," he pleaded. "You are being very foolish."

The *abagados* in Washington will not allow the importation of additional blacks. Daily the price soars for those already in this land. These are people, Senora, *our* people. Some of them have been with Cottonwood from the start."

"*Your* people, perhaps, not mine. They are inexcusable creatures. I deplore their illiteracy, their stupidity, their constant breeding. They will outnumber the whites one day and kill us all."

"You do not understand the situation nor the money they bring to your purse. When we built Cottonwood there wasn't another plantation within twenty miles. We are now locked in by hundreds of "poor white" farmers. We can't hire them, they demand too high a rate of wage. Nor do they help us with the changing times. Their insults, scoffs and continual insinuations fill our people with discontent. It's a constant battle to keep them from becoming lazy, idle, too proud, vicious or wholly useless. Now, with new fields opened we need more labor. It is very simple; we need all our present hands, plus what Merritt will have on shipboard. Surely you can see the possibilities? Cotton will be king of this country."

"Married to a black queen?"

Orlando drew a deep breath, for unaccustomed emotion choked him. He seemed very thoughtful. Then he quickly opened the ledger. "That black queen has done right by you this past decade."

She smiled humorously at Orlando, but his brown face remained frozen and rigid. He closed the ledger, and looked fixedly at his employer's wife.

"I can tell you now that if we sell half our labor we shall stand to lose everything that we have gained."

"WE! We . . . we . . . we . . . that's all I've heard for the last half-hour. Do you have a frog in your pocket? MY husband built that plantation. YOU are just one of the savages!"

"We are not savages at Cottonwood. Out there we

know the meaning of the word *honor*. Our people are families, kin. They respect the master's word. He has always promised that they would not be sold."

"But he is not here, I am in command."

Orlando averted his head. Unseen by Jeanmarie, his hands clenched in his pockets. He felt a great sickness all through him.

"You will destroy all that Merritt has fought to build."

"Sell!"

His heart felt as if burning hands had encased it, and were crushing it. In her decision lay ruin.

Now, with the impending arrival of Merritt Frazer, Orlando's indignation at last broke forth in impassioned words to his sympathetic listener.

The tragic consequences of the impression made in that talk neither party could dream at the moment.

Pacing the wharf with the tread of a caged lion, Orlando suddenly paused and his deep brown eyes flashed.

"I tell you, Yorie, that she-bitch has done her worst by him. She can't do much more. . . ."

He stopped suddenly and drew from his pocket a yellowed ledger sheet. He read the figures over carefully and looked up with flashing eyes: "Caramba! A fortune! She has cost Cottonwood a fortune. And her insane greed has ruined other men as well. Merritt will find his friends in small number because of what she has done. 'What was Merritt Frazer up to' the buyers asked themselves. Two hundred slaves dumped on a market that the day before could hardly get their hands on a half dozen for sale. You've never seen such panic. Rumors came from all quarters, and with each new slander the prices dropped further. By mid-day the market was crowded with four thousand slaves for sale. The Cottonwood slaves went for a tenth of what Merritt originally paid for them. Disaster! Utter disaster and she would not pull back. Sell, sell, sell, she demanded." He paused and his square jaw came together firmly. "I must tell him the truth, but will he think I am working against her? And what has become

of the money? She has not put it into the Cottonwood account. Today I go to the bank to draw out money for supplies. There is hardly enough there to buy a single sack of flour."

"It is not in the house, I know. Just this morning she asked me to pay the green grocer as the house-hold account was low."

"What is going on? Does she pay for her lovers?"

"I've no idea. It's not my business to spy, is it?" She avoided his eyes.

"No." Orlando felt uneasy. "But you do know her better than any."

"To live in a house with a person is not to know them."

He said angrily, "It is obvious that we shall never know her. We are both guilty of helping her to ruin him."

"Maybe we are," she said softly. Then, "Orlando, I wish to return to Cottonwood."

He could hardly hide his surprise. "Why?"

"The children are past an age where I can school them. You need help at the plantation. I shall come back to help."

"I see. It will be best to be away when the break up comes."

"What do you mean by that?" she flared.

"Only that . . ."

"Only that he will have a better opportunity to return to his former bed-wench. Is that what you think?"

"No! No, not so!"

She laughed. "It wouldn't work anyway. He thinks I am responsible for her learning about us in the first place. He would never trust me again. But, it's something else. These long months that he has been away have aged me. He expects us all to stay as we were in the beginning. No one can stay eighteen forever. Even Jeanmarie shall have to learn that brutal lesson. It was a happy, dangerous game at one time, but it couldn't continue."

"Why did you do it?" he demanded

She looked with almost tense eyes. Her voice was low and thrilled with wondering delight.

"That is something," she said slowly, "that you must never know; something devilish, almost fated. I do know it has not brought happiness, not even stability or satisfaction."

"You could safely leave your happiness to me," he rushed out rashly.

"I rather doubt the quality of happiness he would allow us to enjoy. I can hardly now serve two masters, let alone three."

"Then you do know something," he cried. Then, as she read his look, her cheeks crimsoned and it would have been superfluous for him to have added, "about the money."

"I'm *sorry*, Orlando. It's so difficult for the likes of me. You are a man . . . you are free. I'm chained to Jeanmarie in more ways than one."

"Yet you'd run away to Cottonwood."

"That's not far to run. This thing that she is doing will engulf us there, sooner or later."

He began to feel sick. "And . . . you'd let it happen . . . sooner than tell."

"Oh . . . forget I spoke!" She turned away, sighing.

"I can't, Yorie. I can't, because I love you, I love Merritt, I love Cottonwood."

"Oh!" she exclaimed as though the last few moments had not been lived through. "At last you have said it. You love me." Her voice was disappointment-laden. "But it is too late. She'll see us all sold away."

"It's never too late, Yorie. Trust me," he begged. He took her hand.

There was a silence. A ship's bell sounded down the river.

"He'll be here soon," she said.

"Then he can help."

She took her hand away. "His name is Prentice Hunni-

cut. Here in Savannah he goes under the name of Charles Fendway."

He blinked. "But, *he* . . ."

"He's the one who bought up all the slaves on the low margin; selling them off slowly, days later, for a handsome profit."

"And what did she do with the money?"

"There is no money, Orlando. It was even Cottonwood money that he used to buy Merritt's own slaves. To safeguard her vanity she has given him everything."

"How can you know so much?"

She struggled with a curious emotion. "You've never been black, Orlando. When you're black, or part black, white people forget you're about. You become a shadow, a piece of furniture, a *thing*. They talk quite openly in front of you, never suspecting that you have eyes, ears, feelings, emotions, loyalties."

"Even if they are misplaced loyalties?"

"We come from different worlds, you and I. I am loyal to Jeanmarie because she is . . . no, wait. I am probably more loyal to Merritt than you give me credit for. When he left Savannah he left a pregnant wife. She didn't want that child. She was afraid. When it was born I thanked God that Merritt was not here."

"Born? She always said that she had a miscarriage."

"More like a miscarriage of justice. The child was born, Orlando, and she strangled it!"

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph! She's insane!"

"Hardly. I might have done the same thing, being in her shoes. You can recall both of your parents; I can legally claim only one of mine, my mother. You haven't a clue what that means. When I was a girl I could not run and throw my arms around my father's neck, although we lived in the same house. My father was a very stupid business man; his only saving grace was to find a rich husband for his daughter."

"You?"

"Jeanmarie. We are twins. One came out white, one brown."

"Caramba!"

"Now you see why what you asked of me was a lead weight in my stomach; to go against her is to go against my father. Hunnicut knows about us; he's been bleeding M. Dunoyer, and now Jeanmarie, for years."

"Does Merritt know?"

"No."

"Then he must never be told."

"How can you prevent it?"

"I shall find a way."



## *Chapter VII*

Coming up the Savannah River in 1808, Merritt had felt stronger than all the forces of Fate. He had fully believed that laws were elastic and himself invincible. Now, as he bent forward in his chair, the ledger sheet hanging in limp fingers and the coal-oil lamp on the desk throwing its circle of light on the figures, he realized that the battle was on. The forces of which he had been contemptuous were to engage him at once, with no breathing space before the combat. Viewing it all in this light, he felt the qualms of a general who encounters an aggressive enemy before his line is drawn and his battle front arranged.

He had so entirely persuaded himself that his future lay in bringing in new slaves that now, when he had done so at the expense of Cottonwood, his entire plan of campaign must be revised, and new problems must be considered. When he had been swept away on his mission, it had been with the clear sense of realization that, if he mortgaged all to pay for the venture, the profits would more than off-set the indebtedness. It would not now do so, and now came a new question: Had he the right to walk away from it all? Suppose his worst fears became reality? The certainty would be little harder to confess than the presumption and the suspense. Suppose, on the other hand, the fighting chance to which every man clings should, after all, acquit him?

After all, he argued weakly—or perhaps it was the

devil's advocate that whispered its insidious counsel—there might be a mistake. The man of Orlando's story might not be the same as held his promissory paper. But, in answer to that argument, his colder logic contended there had to be a link between the man and Jeanmarie; why else would she sell half of his slaves.

Then, he looked up and started with surprise as he saw her standing before him. At first, he thought that she was a projection of his imagination. Since she had not greeted him on his homecoming, the picture she made in her white gown seemed unearthly. But, now, her voice was real.

"Do you not come to greet me on your first night home?" She laughed, tensely.

He reached forward, and seized her hand.

"Would I have been welcome?"

"I still regard you as my husband," she assured him.

He seized her in his arms with neither reserve nor caution.

"Listen," he said in an impassioned voice. "I have to know the truth. What is Fendway to you?"

She did not draw away. She only looked into his eyes very solemnly.

"The truth?" she repeated, in a bewildered voice. "A friend. A man from back home."

"Another of your lovers?"

"You don't have to ask that," she avowed.

"No?"

"No," she decreed with womanlike philosophy, "you have no right to ask."

"No right," he expostulated, "I have every right. You just said that you still regard me as your husband. Does that include informing me of what you have been about during my leave?"

"Did you inform me when you were playing house with my servant girl?"

"Yorie has nothing to do with this!"

"Yes, of course," she sneered. There was an indignant ring to her words. "Do you think I could forget—or that

if I could I would? Do you think it has been pleasant for me to play second-fiddle to a *black* woman?"

"I have not seen the woman alone in over a decade." To hesitate, to temporize, even to soften his recital, would mean complete victory for Jeanmarie. "Must you always use her as a smoke screen to hide your own faults?" He must plunge in after his old method of directness, even brutality, without preface or palliation.

"It is easy for you menfolk to forget. Why must you always take to the beds of the black ones. That is what has ruined our marriage. It is what has ruined my father, and is ruining me." She shook off some cloud of bewilderment and awakened herself from the shock of the nightmare.

"Your father has been remarried for over ten years. I still have to see proof that his wife is colored."

"Damn his wife! Damn him! That is not the point. Proof? You want proof of our ruination. Three years ago you sold slaves to this man Fendway. And did you notice his look of astonishment when I came into the room? Did you catch the covert innuendoes as he talked—the fact that he talked at me—that he was accusing me—My God! recognizing me for what I really was?"

Jeanmarie stood so unsteadily that Merritt took her arm, and led her to the settee. There, she sank down with her face in her hands. It seemed a century, but when she looked up again, her face, despite its pallor, was the face of one seeking excuses, one trying to make the impossible jibe with fact.

"I suppose you did not catch the full significance of his narrative. No one did except the two of us—the unmasker and the unmasked—and possibly Yorie. Later, when you were in Africa, he called again. He had been to New Orleans for his father's funeral. His name's not Fendway; he's the son of Doctor Mortimer Hunnicut, the man who brought me into the world."

He caught her fingers in his own. They were icy in his hot clasp.

"Tell me what hold he has on you!" He imperiously commanded.

Her voice was incredulous, far away. Slowly, steeling herself for the ordeal, she went through her story; a story that had been kept from her until Prentice Hunnicut had stumbled upon the true facts while going through his father's papers: the birth of twin girls on the Dunoyer plantation, the suicide of Madame Dunoyer which Doctor Hunnicut reported as death from child birth, the rearing of one child as the Dunoyer heir, the other as a servant girl, and, the scheme of Jacques Dunoyer to marry his daughter beyond the tongues of New Orleans gossip.

There was a long, torturing silence as she sat steadily, almost hypnotically, gazing into his eyes.

Then, a remarkable thing happened. The woman came to her feet with the old lithe grace that had for years forsaken her, leaving her a shape of slender distress. She rose buoyantly and laughed!

"But that shouldn't matter, my love, for you've been sleeping with one darky, or the other, for years. You even kidded me once about all of us having some black blood in us."

"Don't!" he commanded, harshly. "Don't!"

"Why?" Her question was serene.

"Because you've made our children black. You've ruined their future."

"No one need ever know," she said, confidently.

"Fendway, or whatever's his name, knows."

"No! I've paid him off," she passionately dissented.

"But, if afterwards," he went on doggedly, "he wants more—blackmailers always do—don't you see?"

She still shook her head in stubborn negation.

"Then we will pay, again and again."

"With what? I often wondered why your father was always borrowing money; that dear doctor fleeced him over the years, and now the son feels the gravy-train can continue with the next generation. It will never stop."

"We have the money."

"What little world do you live in? It took a fortune to build this house, because you were not content with what I made for you at Cottonwood. You do not sail back and forth to Africa purchasing slaves on your good looks, and I lost three ships in a row. We're mortgaged beyond the point of solvency, and who holds those bits of my flesh? Fendway? Oh, he suckered us in, beautifully. The sale you made on the slaves should have realized a profit of over two hundred thousand; you let him steal them for a tenth of that amount. The money is not in the bank account; did you buy him off a second time? You speak of your children's birthright, *you've* sold it away!"

"Then I can always give him what he desires most."

"Haven't you already?"

She reeled as though slapped. She raised her chin almost scornfully and her eyes grew deeper.

"*Good night, Merritt!*"

He was frankly frightened. Unless she promised that she would say nothing, he stood to lose what little chance he had to fight bankruptcy—his white business associates. His mind had been muddled since his return; there was so much to think about: the plantation, the children, the slaves, the crops . . . *the children!* Why hadn't it dawned on him before. He raced for the stairs.

"Where is my new child?" Merritt demanded before he was fully through her bedroom door.

Jeanmarie swayed like something stricken by the wind, and Merritt could see a cloud of cowardice or misery in her face, turned aside and looked into her dressing table mirror.

"Ah!" she cried. "It is dead!"

"How?"

"Does it matter?"

"Hell yes, it matters."

"No it doesn't, Merritt. It was black."

"It was also a human being, or didn't you think of that?"

"It nearly killed me, if that is any concern to you. I nearly died."

"Who attended you? Doctor Mackellar?"

With a broken, strangled cry, Jeanmarie leaped up and fell on Merritt's neck, crying and weeping, a pitiful sight. "Oh, Merritt," she cried, "you know I loved you. You know I loved you in the beginning: I would have died for you—you know that! Oh, darling, darling, what have I done? I couldn't have that child. I feared it, Merritt. Can't you understand? It was black. We produced a black child because of what my father did."

"Who helped you?"

"The only man we could trust," she clutched him about the neck, with the passion of a child in terror.

"Fendway?"

Throughout all this Merritt was like a cold, disbelieving spectator with his wits about him. The man he knew as Fendway held his mortgages; as Hunnicut he had killed his child, blackmailed his wife and father-in-law.

He slipped from the house, not returning until near dawn.

"Yorie," he whispered, holding his hand over her mouth. "Don't make a sound. Dress the children and take them through the kitchen to the back court. Samuel will be there with a carriage. Go as quickly as you can to Cottonwood, I'll follow in a few days. Don't take time now with questions. Here, give this letter of instructions to Orlando. He must accomplish my wishes before I arrive. Now, hurry!"

As the carriage turned out of the courtyard, Yorie looked up at the only illuminated window in the house. The sharp report of a derringer was muffled but distinct. She hugged the children to her breast, fearing for their future more than her own.

## Chapter VIII

Merritt seated himself at the table and looked into her face with a smile:

"Yorie, it's a meal fit for a king!"

The silent supper over, he smoked his pipe before the fire of blazing logs, while she put the twins to bed. He watched her return to the room, the questions building in her face, just as the scaffold boards are placed for an execution.

"About Jeanmarie," she said slowly.

Merritt laid his pipe down with a helpless look. A brief respite flashed through his mind. Maybe he could sidestep the dangerous questions before she pinned him down.

"Orlando! I forgot about Orlando. He wanted to see me right after supper," he cried.

"I, too, wish to discuss Orlando."

The man looked ruefully at the outside door, suddenly straightened his massive frame, lifted his hands above his head and cocked his eye inquiringly. "What's he to do with us?"

She could not look at him directly. She sat on a stool in front of the fire, her pensive young eyes gazing at the leaping flames.

"O Merritt!" she exclaimed. "There is no *us*, never has been. You haven't touched me in nearly twelve years, and suddenly you expect everything to be as it was. It can't be. I'm to become Orlando's wife!"

He managed to stay silent for nearly a half hour. At last he dropped on a stool at her side. He sat for another five minutes staring helplessly at the flames. Big beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. He took her hand. He held it awkwardly and timidly.

"My, but your hand's soft and sweet, Yorie."

"Your evading the issue."

He tore his hand away.

"All right, woman," he protested. "I'm trying my damndest to hold my tongue. I'll see you in hell before I'll let you marry Orlando."

"You can't stop us!" she cried with sudden energy.

"Oh? It seems to me that what was my wife's passes to me upon her death. You were her chattel."

"You promised me before I bedded with you that I would be free!"

"Yes, Yorie, I did . . ." he paused and his fine teeth gleamed in a lecherous smile. "But you know a gentleman will promise anything to get . . ."

"Didn't you mean to keep your word?" She broke in sharply.

"A lot has changed. Jeanmarie is dead. I'm about to lose everything I ever worked for . . ."

"Which has nothing to do with Orlando and I."

"It has everything to do . . ."

"No! It can never be the same. You took me to spite her; there's no reason left for spite. I can never replace her as a wife . . . or a mother. I'm not young anymore, Merritt. We shall each soon be forty. I thirst for a man who can protect me in my later years."

"You'll never want for anything."

"Except love?"

"It's a commodity one can live without."

"Is it, Merritt? Perhaps for you, but not for other people. I doubt that you've ever loved anything, but money and land."

"You sound just like her. You make me sick. Every damn one of you look down on my money, but are damn glad that it is there to keep you fat and sassy. Well, I'll



tell you something: Jeanmarie didn't wipe me out. The best thing she could have done for me was to take up with that no account Hunnicut, then go into her room, lock the door and blow her own brains out."

"Stop it!"

"Why? You've been pestering for the truth ever since I came back from Savannah. Does it shock you?"

"The truth doesn't worry me; it's the lies that I question."

"Lies?"

"I saw you that night. I saw you through the window as the carriage pulled out. She wasn't in a locked room, Merritt. You were with her. You were holding a gun."

He laughed: "You don't believe that?"

"I don't know what to believe. First you said she died of natural causes; then a moment ago that she took her own life. I just don't know. I thought I heard a loud explosion. Was that when . . . ?"

"It doesn't really matter."

"It matters to me. I think I know why you did it, but what of Fendway?"

"He'll never bother us again. No one will ever bother us, we're leaving this area."

"And how shall I go, Merritt?"

"What do you mean?"

"As the wife of your overseer, or the mistress of a murderer?"

There was something in her tone that brought a chill to his heart. The moon was shining in the full white glory of the southern autumn. A night of marvelous beauty enfolded the gleaming plantation. He looked into her eyes and they mirrored the truth: he would never possess her again.

"You may go as Orlando's wife, and be damned. Tell your greasy lover we'll leave in the morning. He can start burning the far fields tonight."

"Burning?"

"Yes! I'll leave Cottonwood the way I found it. No one is going to benefit from my sweat."

"But the mortgage?"

"What mortgage? Dead men can't hold obligations. This is my land, and always shall be, but it has soured. I built it for her, and she shit upon it. I'll build again, but never so that people can get their clutches into me."

And all the love he ever possessed died that night.

And then they moved to the land Merritt had staked off in the heart of the great pinelands a hundred miles from the St. Johns River.

They left the Swanee River and plunged into the trackless forest. No roads had yet scarred its virgin soil. Only the blazed trail for the first ten miles—the trail Merritt had marked with his own hatchet five years before—and then the magnificent woods without a mark. Five miles further they penetrated, cutting down the brush and trees to make way for the wagons.

They stopped at last on a beautiful densely wooded hill near a stream of limpid water. A rough camp was quickly built Indian fashion and covered with pine boughs.

"This shall be for the three of us," he told the twins. "Because of that, we shall call it Meral."

Day after day the axes rang in the woods until a big white patch of sky showed with gleaming piles of clouds. The new land brought change to all of them, but mostly Merritt. Insanely drunk with greed, aflame with lust for power, he drove them all unmercifully.

"It's near time for planting," Orlando said at lunch one day.

"That can wait a year!" Merritt barked. "I need twenty cabins and the main house finished before fall."

"I don't see the need of . . ."

"I didn't ask you to see! Have you learned nothing from me? We are all pirates. But I will teach them to try and steal from me. When I bring my slaves . . ."

"What slaves?"

"Goddamnit, shut up! I'm through with all this questioning. I'm going to say this once, and only once. I'm not finished. I'm probably richer now than I've ever

been. I saw this coming a long way back. Why was it only my ships that MacVicar-Tyne lost, and none of their own? Why was it I saw those same ships anchored on the Gambia River? I was sold out from within. The slaves from the *Lady Anne* never reached the MacVicar-Tyne station on St. Johns; I entrusted them to the Commodore. I want them here by fall! There's only two ways those Savannah blood-suckers can keep their slave markets open: smuggle them in or buy a domestic product."

"You don't aim . . ."

"Exactly! By fall I want every last female belly bulging with new life. It'll take time, but I'll raise a crop that will make me king."

"A human breeding farm," Yorie shuddered.

"Nonsense," Merritt chided. "A new type of plantation."

And Meral grew as Merritt dreamed it would. A unique community within itself.

But with the passing years there were two inhabitants of Meral who were segregated from gaining marital ideas—Alvin and Alina. Settlers were moving in now. Every year brought the news of another neighbor. Outwardly, he contested that none of the neighbors offspring were good enough for his children; inwardly, he feared the possible black child that might be the issue of their union. That they carried within them a trace of negroid blood was a cancer he carried deeply hidden.

And then Mula returned to open old wounds.

# MULA'S BOOK

## Chapter I

On a Friday evening, the beginning of 1808, there appeared at the tasseled tent of Sibi-bel-Massif an old man, who, bowing low, asked to be admitted to the Berger chief so that he might invite him to a meal at the caravan of Cravens Porterhouse.

While the servants were arguing as to whether they should go inside for a reply a young, blue *tagilmust* veiled man came springing off a camel.

"I am Rodger Tougcourt and I must see your *imajag-han* at once." With which he went past the *iklan* slaves, flung aside the goatskin flap, and walked in.

Sibi, the blue man, appeared not to notice him. He was sitting in the corner furthest from the flap with his elbows on his knees and his shrouded head buried in his hands. Tougcourt stood still in the entry-way, too surprised to move but taking in the open-sided tent with his impudent eyes and shifting his position from one side to the other as if to get the seated, veiled figure properly focused. Meanwhile the old man had followed him into the tent. Hardly daring to lift his eyes he advanced with deeper and deeper obeisances until he stood silently before the chief, bent so low that his white locks fell almost to the sand floor.

The Tuareg nobleman looked up. His face was covered in a blue veil. Not a muscle moved in his face, but a sudden fierce gleam flashed in his great dark eyes. With-

out moving his arm he beckoned with one finger to a vassal and whispered in his ear.

"My master asks who you are," said the man, turning to the aged visitor.

"I am servant to Cravens Porterhouse, an agent of the British Empire."

The servant had difficulty with English and the old man knew no Tamahaq. Sibi found the translation of his questions superfluous and turned on Rodger Tougcourt, asking him in flawless English.

"What is your name?"

"Tougcourt."

"And your father's?"

"Admiral Jessup Tougcourt."

The eyes flickered with a devilish smile. "Then you may remove the *tagilmust*, Englander. Your parched skin shows you to be no Tuareg. You have done me honor by coming to me with your face in cloth, but only the Tuareg men must remain so in front of strangers. You may uncover."

"It is as you say."

"Do you know this other Englander . . . ah . . . Porterhouse?"

"Every Englishman in Africa knows who Porterhouse is . . . but . . . ah . . . I have not the honor to know him personally."

"And his business?"

"Flesh!"

"Tuareg capture and hold slaves, we never buy nor sell." Sibi paused. After a silence he said bluntly, "What do you want?" Rodger Tougcourt saw that the piercing eyes were not directed at him and held his tongue.

The silence fell on the old man. "My master wishes to invite you to his humble tent," stammered the agitated old man, "for a meal and to look upon a rare prize which . . ."

"No," interrupted Sibi, coolly and firmly. "Rare prizes oft times have rare prices attached. Your master has traveled to Fachi for naught."

The old man retired in confusion. But instead of leaving the area he took up a position outside the tent and began to meditate on how the harsh words from the Berger would turn into harsh blows from Porterhouse.

"And what is it you wish?" the young Englishman was asked by the servant. He was still standing in the center of the tent, but had taken from his robe and unfolded a roll of paper. "I wish to acquaint the great Sibi-bel-Massif with my father and the benefits they could gain by becoming better acquainted. Without the knowledge we possess Sibi-bel-Massif is only another Berger chief. With our knowledge, and the blessings of Allah, he is supreme."

The interpreter expected Sibi to have the insolent creature thrown out without ceremony. But to his surprise the chief asked him in English. "Few know my reasons for being so far into the desert. Do you talk of this to Tass-kano?"

"We know all the prominent chiefs and all the principal people along the coast."

"You are a long way from the sea."

"Am I any farther away from it than you?" He waved a blond skinned arm in the direction of the Mediterranean, a thousand miles to the north. "My journey has been long: when we might have met, a month past, in Alger; or a week later in Tarabulus."

Sibi examined him critically. He had thought his travels well guarded: a private ship from Alger to Tarabulus; an unmarked caravan to Bilma and hence to Fachi. And yet, two Englishmen had found him in the middle of the desert. He wished to know how much of his journey's purpose was exposed. But without betraying his surprise, Sibi continued the conversation with hardly a perceptible break. "Sit down, here."

The young man promptly obeyed.

"How are the English in the Mediterranean getting on?"

"Better than the French or Italians," replied Tougcourt, smiling conceitedly.

"Or as good as you wish your *mad* King George to know?"

Tougcourt regarded Sibi in a new light. How did this Berger chief from the heart of Africa come to be so well posted in England's internal affairs, to have heard of George III of England's fits of madness. Tougcourt underwent a subtle change. There was something not quite canny about Sibi-bel-Massif.

"It is as your excellency has said. In spite of our great fleet your Berger pirates take a heavy toll. Our nation suffered a loss of its American colonies and it would appear that we may have to fight them once again. The bounty of the sea is vast, if properly shared. Tasskano . . ."

"Enough!" cried Sibi. "That my half-brother has sent you makes me question your words. I came here to meet a representative of a sort. Do the English send boys?"

"I am my father's son. An ambassador would have little ransom value, but I . . . don't you see? My father is willing to share with you all the captured American slave ships."

"Is that all you English talk about? War, sea lanes and supremacy?"

"As you say, my lord, of that and nothing besides. Is it so dishonorable to speak of riches? Vast riches?"

Sibi fell silent. His eyes closed so that his whole face became shadowed by the veil.

Rodger Tougcourt scrutinized his face in consternation. Had he gone too far? Within seconds the chief opened his eyes again and said in a perfectly calm voice: "Listen, Englander, listen good. I may have a message for your father. I will ponder your words. You will be a guest of my caravan until I am ready to speak with you again."

Tougcourt sprang up in alarm. "That will be impossible. I must return to Tripoli and my father's flag ship. Besides, I haven't even told you the full terms of the proposal."

"Haven't you?" Sibi chided. "We shall meet again."



Tougcourt had been excused. He left the tent feeling that he had failed in his mission and he was just as sure that it would be impossible for him to leave the oasis without the express permission of Sibi.

"Excuse me," the old man pulled at his sleeve. "It is forty years since I have seen England, but I take you for a gentleman."

"Naturally," Tougcourt sniffed pompously.

"Also it is hard to close one's ears around a Berger tent."

"It is still called eaves-dropping at home."

"Perhaps, m'lord, but by chance you may wish to accept my master's invitation, which his nibs turned down," he spoke to him as if exhorting a child with a pat on the head. "Perhaps in our caravan you will find the proper gift for Sibi-bel-Massif. You have affronted him by talking business without the custom of first presenting him with a gift equal to the merits of your talk." Then whispering softly into his ear he repeated: "A worthy gift."

In the peaceful Fachi oasis, the desert sun caught the splayed palm fronds, and Rodger Tougcourt waited with Cravens Porterhouse to view his gift to Sibi-bel-Massif.

The Admiral's son became aware of people crowding into the tent behind them. He turned around. About ten people stood respectfully watching them: a thin, black young woman with very glistening skin giving suck to a heavy, coffee-colored baby; several old men with wrinkled leather skins, crinkled hair and the faded clothes of caravaneers, and amused young men, one in a lion-mane cape, and others, all with rich black skin, lingered nearby. The girls all barefooted and sassy, were tight-skinned and well fed. One of them pointed at Rodger and said, "*Ten-as-ta-lign!*"

"She gives you greetings," Porterhouse interpreted. "She is Amharic from the *ambas* of Ethiopia.

Rodger merely nodded.

"What kind of trouble is your father in this time?" Porterhouse asked unexpectedly.

"You know father?"

"Since we were pups together at school."

"You . . ." Rodger was incredulous that the smelly old slave agent had ever been to school, let alone a contemporary of his father.

The misanthrope crackled into laughter.

"I've fried more kettles of Jessie Tougcourt's fish than he did himself. Now he's got a son to run his bugger errands."

"Really . . ."

"Really . . . nothing!" Porterhouse became short. "What's the old sodomite up to now?"

"Not that it concerns you, Mister Porterhouse, but the British Navy has lost far too many frigates and men-of-war to the American pirates."

"And your psalm singing father expected you to march through the Sahara, find Sibi and say . . . Ho there, old boy, be gentle with His Majesty's vessels and go only after the colony chaps."

Rodger could not help but laugh at the comical, if not perfect mimicry of his father's stuffy tones.

Porterhouse rose, tall, straight, and slapped the young Englishman on the back. "When I could no longer stand the England of men like your father I came to the jungles. Even here, my young friend, the caste system is supreme. To gain Sibi's ear you must first win his favor. As I see it, and Lord knows why I should be helping Mother England, you wish to get Sibi and the Berger chiefs to stand free from anything waving the Union Jack."

"Almost."

"Oh?" The word intrigued Porterhouse.

"How much is your help worth?"

"Have you heard of King Prempeh?"

"All England has heard of how the savage has been sent into exile."

"Correction, my impetuous young man, not savage—he is Ashanti; they're probably the most cultured people in this entire continent." He nodded toward a strikingly beautiful girl. "Even here they stand apart; respected by

the other tribesmen. And the Berger's respect the Ashanti more than any other."

"I don't see how that can possibly help me. The Berger's are also notorious for only bedding with their own women. A bed-wench, even though Ashanti, would be an insult. I prize my head too highly to fall prey to your flesh peddling."

"Naturally, you would. And like your arrogant father you're very quick to jump to conclusions."

"Stand fast with your tongue, man. My father is the Admiral of the Fleet."

"Fitting career, I'm sure. Did he sleep his way into the navy, the same way he successfully got through school?"

"I will not sit here and hear my father insulted."

"Then leave. I have no use of you, you have use of me. You require a worthy gift. There are no London jewel shops behind these palm trees, and Sibi is not going to grant you another audience until you come bearing a token of British good will."

"And you have such a prize?"

"A rare prize. In my caravan I have Nkumula Prempehumasi. To his people this means: one who lives free as the son of our king. So that your *patriotic* mind can grasp the full implication of that phrase, it would be as if I had just said that I hold captive George Augustus Frederick, Prince of Wales, heir apparent to the British crown."

Rodger Tougcourt was at last impressed with his dinner host. "How much?" he asked simply.

Porterhouse smiled. "A hundred pounds . . ."

"Fair enough."

". . . from each ship taken by Sibi's pirates."

"It's outlandish!"

"So is your scheme. You are like Chinese rice-paper. If an Admiral can be sticky-fingered in his youth, how much greedier is his lust as a man?" The old man walked with stately ease toward the tent flap and waved Rodger back to his seat as he started to rise. "Rest yourself; think about it. Dinner will be ready in a half an hour or an

hour. It makes little difference, we have no where to go." The crowd respectfully followed Porterhouse.

It was absurd, young Tougcourt thought. A hundred pounds for a black was quite fair, but Porterhouse was seeking a hundred times a hundred.

"*Ten-as-ta-lign!*"

She had returned. Rodger was quick to note the subtle change in costume: the outer robe had been discarded. Highlighting the coppery skin were adornments of ivory and hair of giraffe tails. Her hair had been woven into tiny plaits that reminded Rodger of his sister's wooly winter coat.

"I am of missionary school," she told Rodger, "which makes me seventeen."

It did not make sense to the young Englishman, but his enjoyment of her pretended sophistication kept him from correcting her.

"I have brought the tea."

"Brought."

She disregarded the correction, handing him a small glass. It was hot, sticky-sweet, and thirst quenching.

"*Gandurah*, no?" she asked.

"I don't understand."

"No need *gandurah*. Me help."

Her nimble fingers clawed at his long desert robe.

"No! No, I need!" He struggled to get away from her.

"More comfortable," she insisted, pulling the flowing garment away from his shoulders.

"Stop it!" he demanded. He turned to flee and stumbled over a low stool. Even as he fell she was tearing the garment from his body. "Leave me alone. I haven't . . . I didn't . . . my trousers are. . . . Damn you!"

She giggled at the sight of his starched white legs sticking out of jodhpurs. Only his boots and a native loin support kept him from complete nudity.

"It's only," he flushed, "that it is vastly cooler riding those bloody beasts. Give me back my covering."

"No need. We are alone."

"But the others."

"They are cool, too."

"This is ridiculous. The next thing you know you'll be suggesting we get on that." He looked with apprehension at the low tamarisk bed.

The girl did not fully comprehend his rapidly uttered words, but the direction of his gaze brought a wicked giggle from her throat.

"Oh no, my lass, you've guessed wrong. Porterhouse may enjoy cutting the dark meat, but it's England forever, for me."

She giggled again, running the back of her fingernails over his thigh. "You tell me truth. You descend to press lips with woman?"

He eyed her narrowly. "You tell me the truth," he retorted. "Do you sniff the nose of the Tuareg men?"

"Me no know. Me no Tuareg."

They stared at each other a moment, and then burst into laughter.

Laughter eased the tension, and brought a subtle beauty to her delicate face. He was still uncomfortable about sitting in an open-walled tent with a woman whose sole attire was a few strands of beads that only partially hid her femininity. She poured him a fresh glass of tea, willingly answering his questions about her homeland and the mission school. He almost became accustomed to her smallish bared breasts, jutting out from each side of her chest, with the mass of ivory and colored beads filling the valley between.

"Do you know the Ashanti?"

"All know the proud one. The master treats him special."

"Ouch! Don't touch me there. Those bloody beasts have rubbed me raw."

"I fix."

Consternation coursed through his mind as she rinsed her hands in a clay bowl. He flinched as her cool skin touched his inner thigh.

"Will refresh you. Lay down, please."

Mentally, he cursed Porterhouse, not knowing if he

would offend her by refusing. With quaking heart he backed to the tamarisk bed, nearly falling over backwards as he misjudged its position.

Cashmere soft hands smoothed the cooling ointment into his calfs, thighs, chest. The stroke of her fingers announced what treasure she sought. His English morality was betrayed by the acclivity with which the crotch-cloth was pushed aside by his rising manhood. The two feet of open space, at the bottom of the tent, was causing him more embarrassment than her artful advances.

Quaking lips came to hesitantly rest upon his fevered mouth. They were like the tea: hot, sticky-sweet. Instinct, rather than his coazing, invoked the girl to taste of his mouth with her tongue. The small arrow was wonderously soft and pliable. The girl's voice suddenly rose to a mournful cry, then died to a low sensuous purr. Above her womanly sounds he heard the beads fall to the floor.

Upon his chest Rodger could feel the pliant breasts begin to harden and the nipple cones became pointed stones.

Slowly, gently, his turgid circumference was grasped by her moist palm. A moment of clarity brought him to the point of pushing her aside, but the thought was quickly erased as she rubbed her furry cove across his thigh.

His breath was coming in eager gasps as she climbed onto the low bed. He could not look. Sightless he could consider her white. But did color really matter at that moment? She was the possessor, he the possessed. Her slender frame hovered over him, slowly dipping until they met at the edge of the puckering slit. Her eyes flared in eager excitement as the white shaft melted away into blackness. He gasped. She plunged him deep into the cavern.

"Waa-eee!" she intoned, bringing her buttocks to rest on his thighs. Her ivory teeth meshed as she jack-pumped her legs into a frenzied pounding. He lay, an in-

toxicated victim, yet, cold to the true circumstances. He could still taste the sweetness of her mouth, and suddenly it was a bitter taste. He could see her face behind his tightly closed eyes, and it was black. Black! He wanted it over—finished—but was too much a prig to push her from his swollen member until it had been sated. He lay, unmoving, uncaring, not thinking, until the storm took him in its flight and tore the frustration from his loins. Only then did he show his disgust and shove her aside. And like most men of his ilk looked first to see if the color had rubbed off on him.

## Chapter II

It was a fine, gay meal. The natives in the caravan sang out music from centuries gone by, and the food kept coming from the open fires: roast kid, fried goat-cheese, filled dates, dried lizard, skins of bitter wine. Everything was served in a common bowl. Those without a spoon used their right hand to dip out the food.

"Don't let it worry you," Porterhouse laughed. "On the desert you use the right hand for eating, the left for nature's call."

The meal was torture to the fastidious younger man. There was no denying that Porterhouse enjoyed his dinner, but the enjoyment was too obvious. The old man caught the disapproving glance of his guest and interpreted it rightly.

"*It's all right*, my lad. This is far from being Buckingham Palace. Eatin' is no art in Africa. It's a pleasure."

Later when it was getting darker and the sun was red hot on the horizon and sinking fast, Porterhouse clapped his hands. The girl came to the tent opening leading a handsomely attired figure.

As the second figure turned into the setting sun Rodger gasped. He had understood Porterhouse to say that the prince was a thirteen-year-old boy. Yet, standing with the dying rays basking him in a rosy glow he appeared as tall as Rodger.

And it was not only his height that was commanding—it was something more, something electrifying. Rodger



could almost feel an extraordinary spiritual power surrounding the young black. This was no ordinary native; the face and body were as though stolen from an ancient Greek temple.

"There's your answer," Porterhouse said.

Rodger could only shake his head in puzzlement.

"How did you gain such an Olympian creature? Surely, his father has been demanding that he be also placed in exile."

"His father thinks him dead. Only bloody luck brought him to my station. Some ruddy colony blighter thought the lad too full of supernatural power. Scared the pee out of the bugger. He had power almighty. Nearly did in two doctors before we got him knocked out properly for the operation."

"Operation?" Rodger was instantly interested. "Nothing that will harm our agreement, I hope?"

"It will help it."

"I don't understand."

"Lift his *gandurah*, Mitashu."

Rodger inspected the newcomer with fresh interest. An hour before he had been overly proud of his masculine member; now the black youth made him feel of pygmy size.

Porterhouse was staring at Rodger in amazement. The pudgy man had sent the girl to soften up the staid stuffed shirt, but had he seen earlier this hidden intimate look on Rodger's face he might have planned differently. British boys' school had changed little, he thought, since his day. It still left every man with a bit of buggery in him.

"Are you at liberty to say whether or not we are . . . ah . . . business partners? Is the lad worth it?"

"He certainly is!" Rodger said too quickly, too emphatically. He flushed. Suddenly he discovered that he didn't quite know what his feelings were. He paused, and as though that ended the matter he extracted from an elaborately engraved and sadly tarnished silver-plated case several large coins. "I trust gold coins will be suitable."

"Admirable!" Porterhouse sighed relievedly as he ten-

derly took possession of the coins. "Just don't use the boy too harshly before you present him as a gift. The Berger's are known to inspect their gifts most carefully—front and back."

Rodger's jaw hardened, his sinewy frame tensed and a fighting light blazed in his fine, level eyes.

"I don't . . ."

"Then don't." Porterhouse grinned.

Matters were clarifying slightly in the brain of young Tougcourt. But his curiosity was still unsatisfied.

"Will Sibi use him as . . . ah . . . his boy?"

Porterhouse shrugged his rounded shoulders.

"One can do with a gift what one chooses. *Bell afia*," he said. "Farewell, my friend . . . until our first ship comes in."

Rodger released the boy from his chains, motioning for him to follow him back to Sibi's camp.

Instinct made Mula fear the Englishman. The Ashanti were a highly moral race, casting out with stones those males born with the seed of a woman within their hearts. The insidious acts performed upon his body by Porterhouse had nearly driven him to suicide, but this to an Ashanti would have been even a greater crime.

He could at least be thankful that the chains had been removed from his wrists, giving him a fighting chance if this new master attempted an unnatural act.

Following the custom of the caravaneers, they rolled themselves in their mantles, covering their faces as well as their bodies, and lay down upon the oasis grass to sleep.

Panting for breath, trembling with fear, Mula waited until the man was soundly sleeping, and the camels, lying down to rest themselves, were silently chewing their cud. Noiselessly, he unwound himself from the *tagilmust*. One quick glance at the sky gave him the points of the compass, and, creeping in eager haste, Mula reached the edge of the oasis.

Sand! Sand, sand, sand in billowing mountains like giant waves of the ocean, lay about him in every direc-

tion. Nowhere, search as he would, was there a clue to a possible escape route.

He was still anxiously scanning the rolling sand dunes when the first rays of the rising sun shot from the eastern horizon, flashing a halo of glory upon each sandy crest, before they touched the green oasis. Never, in all his life, had he ever been so alone. His life had been controlled by his mother, father, or a *chockta*, ancient teacher. Even aboard the slave ship, or in Porterhouse's river station, he had been among his own people. Now, there was no one. Around him now would be a babel of cacophonous languages that he could not understand. In vain, he fought back the tears. He was just past thirteen, almost a year away from his home, and trying hard not to let his little boy heart show. He must now become his own man. With an arm knotted with muscles, which a strong man twice his age would have envied, he wiped away the salty tears.

Suddenly the morning silence was broken by a sharp cry, and another and another in quick succession mingled with savage yells.

It was not the cry of discovering his absence, for which he had been waiting, and Mula sprang to his feet and looked anxiously about him.

Looking back for the Englishman, Mula saw the vacant spot where he had been lying, and could distinguish beyond the sleeping figures in the Berger camp. The sounds had come from the Porterhouse tents. He ran for the encampment.

It was a fearful sight which met his eyes. The caravaneers and servants were still lying there, but they were no longer sleeping. They were dead or dying. Up a concealed gully, he spotted five men herding the women away. There was no mistaking the stance of the outlaw leader—the Englishman. Using the Berger's for his own advantage, Tougcourt had crept upon his unsuspecting dinner host to win the valuable prize of silence.

It was the second time that Mula's eyes had rested

upon a scene of blood, and he stood benumbed with horror.

There was no assistance which Mula could render the unfortunate men. The Berger caravan was already awake and preparing to depart. His only hope of survival lay in remaining with the murderers. It was doubtful if his flesh and blood could withstand a lone journey across the wastelands.

With a shudder, he advanced upon the terrible scene. A faint sound caught his ear. He started, clutched his mantle, and turned sharply about, thinking that the Englishman had seen him and returned. It was only Porterhouse who had been left for dead. He had raised himself upon his elbow, and was trying to attract Mula's attention.

"Boy! Boy!" he gasped in Mula's tongue. "They will betray you!" He fell back unconscious.

For a moment Mula was tempted to hurry on. He did not want to go near the blood-splattered man who had so defiled him, but something whispered to him of his early training: once wounded, but not dead, an enemy must be healed.

It required no little courage of the Ashanti boy, all alone with the dead, to search among the bodies for an undamaged water skin. There was but one, and it, nearly empty, but he poured the liquid down the parched throat of the almost insensible man.

"Bless you, lad!" he gasped. "More. Give me more!" But there was no more. He thought of running to the oasis well, but the poor man shook his head. It was too late. He was dying.

Suddenly he roused himself. He made a desperate struggle to call back his failing senses, and, for a moment, threw off the encroaching death. He had almost given up, forgetting something of great importance. Steadying himself upon his elbow, he looked into Mula's face and said:

"You are a beardless youth, but you are important to the British. Do not fear, they will not kill you. Listen to

me. The man who sold you to me is fearful of your powers. Remember his name—Merritt Frazer. He lives in Georgia. If you can get to him, he will help you return to your people. I have heard it said that among the Fanti tribe is one who possesses the Golden Stool; with it you can reclaim your rightful heritage. Do not trust the English or the Berger tribesmen, they will sweep across Africa enslaving all."

Too frightened to speak and hardly comprehending the situation, Mula simply shook his head.

The man made another effort to overcome the stupor that had almost mastered him. He succeeded in reaching deep within his clothing, and gasped:

"It is gone! Tougcourt has taken the proof of what I say. Someday you will have great need of it, get it back."

Hardly realizing what he said, Mula solemnly uttered: "I will get it back for you."

He was trying to wipe the blood away from Porterhouse's mouth when the slaver grasped at his hand and with a gasp, let the hand fall from lifeless fingers.

Minute after minute passed, but Mula did not move a muscle. His head still echoed with the words that had been placed there. His eyes still rested upon the lips that would never speak again.

His lips parted and he muttered, angrily: "You took away from me manhood, replacing it with an attempt to make me woman. For this I should rejoice at your death." Then it suddenly occurred to him that the caravan must be heading for this place called Georgia; for to his mind the world was only as large as the African continent. "But you have also given me renewed hope; for this I wish you peace on your next journey."

He slowly returned to the caravan, pondering upon the dying statement of the slaver till word for word it was fastened in his memory. It was hard for him to believe that his enemy would now befriend him, set him free, and help him to gain back the Golden Stool. An

Ashanti must speak the truth upon his death bed, but was it the same for the white men? Only in this place called Georgia could he learn the course of his destiny.

Blasted by grit, nauseated by a constant diet of water, millet and dried goat cheese gruel; unused to the cumbersome twenty feet of cotton *tagilmust* head-and-shoulder covering, his faith did not falter. For ten weeks the dromedary army moved northward across the world's most forbidding landscape.

For those weeks Mula found himself becoming a "blue man," as the heat-blistering sun baked the blue cloth dye into his black skin.

Rodger Tougcourt withheld the presentation of his gift until a propitious moment. When the caravan reached the salt pits of Bilma, Tougcourt was delighted to see the oasis crowded with a variety of caravans. On the night Sibi was required to host the leaders of the other caravans, Mula was presented to Sibi-bel-Massif in a pompous ceremony. Not wishing the Europeans present to think he was in league with the British, he paid little mind to his new acquisition, leaving the boy in the care of his stewards.

From Bilma to Bir al Wa'r, Marzug to Sawknah, Bani Wald to Zanzur, the Berger caravan marched. Now Mula seldom saw the Englishman or his new master. The stewards kept him under special guard, secretly selling his body by night to any caravaneer with the price to pay.

The oft-times lecherous and sadistic assaults Mula endured with stoic calm. Each day brought him closer to this land called Georgia and freedom. No Ashanti knew of his disgrace, and once free he could cleanse his soul.

It was not until they had boarded ship for the water journey to Beni Saf that Rodger Tougcourt learned of the sexual abuses. Fearing his own youthful tastes for such an encounter, he took his wrath out on Sibi.

"Allah is not the friend of cowards who strike into a boy for their own sexual gratification," he scowled with hatred.

"Bah!" exclaimed the leader of the Berger's, spitting upon the deck in rage. "Allah can not concern himself with the back-side of a single black boy."

"Bah!" returned Rodger, spitting with almost exact similarity. "The boy is worth more to us alive than split wide-open by one of your bugging bastards."

"Business associates . . ." Sibi started then stopped. It is possible that the native realized that information was being extracted from him. It is also possible that he merely lapsed in sullen silence on account of his humiliation at learning of the depravity of his men. At all events Rodger could not taunt him into speaking during the voyage around the tip of Tunisia.

Unexpectedly the small ship turned back, the harbor was blockaded by French men-of-war. Put ashore by long boats at Tizi-Ouzou, Sibi formed a new caravan. Going south into the sacred Atlas Mountains, they lived the life of the Tuareg; taking the ancient paths through groves and villages, over the sand and over the hills, and over sand again, always back towards Beni Saf.

Sibi and Rodger Toucourt would mysteriously disappear for days, even weeks at a time—sometimes together, sometimes separately. But always leaving Mula with the caravan. His life during those frustrating months was drastically altered—no man dared touch him on penalty of death. His inquisitive mind helped him to gain quickly a working knowledge of the Tuareg language and customs.

Nearing his fourteenth year, and almost two years away from his people, Mula learned that at last they would be going to Beni Saf. He thought of the old man's words, his constant companion, and thought his search soon to be over.

Of an Islamic holy man he one day asked: "Friend *marabout*, have you knowledge of this place called Georgia?"

After a pause of malignant contemplation the old wise man pointed northeast. "Past the land of the Turks."

"Will I see it?"

The old man looked up in amazement. Why would this black lad have need to see the dreaded land of the Moslem enemy? He had evil thoughts of Russian Georgia. He laughed. "Go see it for yourself."

"But I am a slave," said Mula in surprise.

"A grown Tuareg man does not make slaves of children," returned the holy man contemptuously. "You may go now," he flashed a toothless grin. "If you are a good swimmer." He scrambled off, chuckling at his own joke, leaving a half-bewildered Mula.



### Chapter III

Beni Saf sits back of its harbor, a medley of burnished grill work, sandstone walls and onion-domed mosques. Along the waterfront is a fringe of ragged palms. At one end of the semicircle that breaks the straight coast line, a few sailing vessels lay at anchor; at the other rise massive walls separating the Berger fortress from the city. From the southern land rise, Mula had his first view of the city. He drew a long inhalation of the hot air, and looked anxiously about him.

He had been asking himself during the length of his desert journey whether his betrayer would be at the end of the dusty road. He had walked the hot sands with the oppressing consciousness that he would step into a new world—the world of the white skinned man. Now, he drew up, and swept his eyes questioningly about.

Before him stretched a broad open space, the end of the world, where sea and sky joined in blue harmony. He shuddered at the sight of the ships, digging his bare toes into the sand so violently the dust swirled hot and indolent. Never again did he wish to ride the large water evils.

Below lay the market of Beni Saf, and on the minaret of its mosque a figure appeared. A few barefooted *Igdalen* natives slouched across the sun-reflecting square, their shadows blue against the rising yellow morning heat. Mula's gaze swung steadily about the radius of sight, but his brain, like a paralyzed nerve, touched by

■e sights and sounds of his first city viewing, gave no reflex—no response.

From the minaret sounded *La Illaha il Allah Mahmoud rousol il Allah*—the morning call to prayer. Mula did not need to hear the muezzin's call, however; he had learned the five daily times the caravaneers must stop to pray. He had become fascinated at the ritual of the Bergers reverently facing toward Mecca to repeat the solemn *Nummee Allah vouhamada*.

At first he had been frightened that his new master possessed such a powerful god. When first Sibi had stood erect, with open hands beside his head, the palms turned forward, and his voice calling out the ancient words, Mula had been perplexed. Then Sibi placed his hands upon his knees, then sat upon the mat on the sand. Then with his open hands upon the rug, he touched his forehead to the mat as he repeated the closing words of the prayer. In this position he remained for some time, whispering for strength and courage to carry out the journey.

There was something so solemn and impressive in the deathlike stillness that it seemed to Mula that this man must be as powerful as his own king-father.

The journey to the city proved much shorter than Mula expected. As they made their way through the bazaar, Mula found the narrow streets densely crowded. Caravaneers and merchants, Bergers and idle Arabs mingled with an array of every tribesmen from Northwest Africa. There were venders of all things pertaining to the necessities or luxuries of life; water carriers with goat-skins on their shoulders; fruit criers with wooden trays upon their heads; donkeys laden with cumbersome baskets, beneath which they were almost lost to sight; camels carrying packs of a thousand pound's weight upon their backs, as though they were bundles of feathers; everything hustling and jostling, face-shrouded men and boys shouting and pushing for the right of way.

It was the first experience of the Ashanti boy in real city life, and the very first time that his bare feet had ever touched stone paved streets. He could hardly imag-

ine himself again sitting on the Ashanti plain, hunting the fleet-footed zebra, his life had so entirely changed: his determination to keep his vow had grown stronger every day; only now he realized more the magnitude of the task he had undertaken.

For the first time Mula looked about him for a particular face. At the moment there were no white men, and while he watched for one, the caravan turned suddenly into a great gate, crossed a massive court paved with limestone and entered a garden. Beyond the dancing waters, swaying palms, flowers of rare and exotic coloration, lay a magnificent edifice.

This redoubtable establishment, residing within the fortress-like twenty-foot-thick stone walls, was the grand residence of Sibi-bel-Massif, Mufti of Beni Saf.

Following a steward, Mula entered the substantial stone structure. The marble flooring was cool to his feet. His eyes narrowed at such luxury. Quietly he obeyed the hand signals of the servant, passing through a reed curtain to a windowless room.

With all the patience and dogged submission to destiny so strongly developed in the Ashanti, Mula sat down upon a rug. There were luxurious ottomans about the room and divans taken from the ships of Spain, Italy and England, but the boy knew them not for sitting. The magnificence in this chamber of Sibi's official residence only disturbed his thoughts.

He became so deeply buried in the past that he had entirely forgotten where he was, when the rattle of the reed curtain aroused him, and starting from his dream, he found a group entering.

Reverently touching his forehead to the floor, Mula remained prostrate until his elders were seated. Then he rose and stood erect while they surveyed him. He knew that a part of his future rested with this gathering. He showed himself to be a prince.

Mula could not bring his eyes to remain on Sibi, Rodger Tougcourt, or the older man with the flaring white beard. The fourth member held his rapt attention,

and it seemed to Mula that his very heart was being searched by grave and piercing eyes.

Caroline Tougcourt was a striking woman, able to command the attention of Counts, Dukes, and Kings. Depending upon her mood, she could be regal or the epitome of bitchery. That day she was a lonely girl with wide-set blue eyes and a proud head. She, too, was undergoing a traumatic experience—the startlingly handsome beauty of the boy. Mula's black skin was as alien to her eyes as her wealth of shimmering summer wheat hair and ivory skin was to his sight.

In the sanctity of the room, the charade of the desert could be dropped. After Sibi had refreshments poured for them, and the servants departed, he removed the *tagilmust* from his face.

"I did not know I would be affording you a family reunion, Admiral," Sibi scoffed.

"It seemed advantageous, your excellency. The American fleet has been most intense from Gibraltar to the Suez. That is why I sent Rodger to you."

"A singularly insignificant action on your part, Admiral. I, too, have spies. Each day I spent in the desert made Tass-Kano feel stronger, but actually weakened him. He may sign all the pacts he likes with the Americans, but I have been out among the people; while he has sat in Beni Saf."

"Can you still control the pirates?"

"I am the pirates, Admiral; just as you are the British Navy in the Mediterranean." He paused. "The Americans are no fools, sir. I'm sure that they suspect where, and how, the pirates receive their operating instructions. However, I doubt that they care to tangle once again with your forces so soon after winning their independence. Your family in my house does me honor, and will lead the Americans to believe that a bond is forming between our nations."

"Exactly the point, my friend. And with your permission, I intend on leaving my daughter as your house

guest. In certain quarters I've let it become known that your interest is quite strong on her behalf."

Sibi laughed. "That duplicity might work with you English, even the Americans; but will be a joke among Tass-Kano's followers. I am a devout family man, Admiral. I hope this ploy does not reach the ears of my four wives."

"Four? My, my . . . I didn't know. Perhaps I should . . . ah . . ."

"She'll be quite safe, I assure you. My faith does not permit me to touch the unbeliever."

"Yes . . . yes . . . quite so. Admirable, I'm sure. Now . . . humph . . . as to this other matter. The boy's father has been informed that the lad is alive and quite safe. We must keep the situation as such so that the old harridan doesn't try to reassemble his people. The problem is . . . aha . . . how does one treat a prince in exile . . . that is . . . aha . . . a black prince?"

"I really don't know, Admiral. And frankly, I could care less. The boy has no useful purpose to me, or my people. I find it your problem. I was forced into accepting him as a gift; a gift I hardly wished to accept, but did so for his safe arrival in Beni Saf. He now, once again, becomes your problem."

"Impossible! I couldn't possibly take him aboard my flag ship. He would pose a real sticky-wicket."

"I cannot spare men to guard him. The desert is its own prison; a city another matter. I cannot be held responsible here if he should suddenly roam off into the howd."

"Father," Caroline Tougcourt spoke up in a soft, lilting voice. "The boy must be educated. Unless he speaks to us, how can we make him do our bidding?"

"That doesn't solve the problem, my dear."

"But it does, Father. I shall educate him."

"Impossible!"

"It shall occupy my time, and keep both of us from coming problems for the Mufti."

"Sensible," Sibi nodded. "And I shall make it even more reasonable. Lord Admiral, the boy was presented to me as a gift from your son. With the blessings of Allah I place him at her lovely feet as a token of my esteem and as her servant. No one can question her need for a servant."

"Agreed." Caroline Tougcourt smiled. But had her father been able to see into her heart at that moment, he might have over ruled Sibi.

## Chapter IV

In the soft flow from the oil-lamp, Caroline's angular face seemed carved from precious pink-white alabaster. Were it not for an occasional flashing of the sea-blue eyes, she could have been an exquisite goddess, a work of exceptional art that one never captures in a single study, but one to savor slowly and carefully over a lifetime.

She took his hand. "My name is Caroline. I shall be your friend. Oh, I know you don't understand me, but I shall teach you."

He didn't need to understand; he was enraptured by the tinkling voice, the gentleness that flowed from her eyes. Even if able to speak, he would have stood speechless with awe.

No fear crossed his heart as her hands, in hungry anticipation, examined the muscle ropes of his torso. Not a word passed between them nor was any needed . . . her touch, her mouth, her body spoke in a way more wonderful than any he could imagine.

And when the hunger reached its uncontrollable zenith, Caroline burst from her clothing, crying for the boy to follow suit.

In utter disbelief, he gawked at the voluptuousness of her pale nudity. Bared breasts were no novelty to his young eyes, nor had they ever before held a sexual significance. It was their size that confounded him. Ashanti women were uncommonly small. The enormity of her alabaster treasures left him trembling.

The breasts, however, were but a fraction of her exquisite features. His dark eyes darted from the pinnales to the receding lines of her narrow hips and on to the full-bloomed buttocks, then back again to a sight of wonderment: a puff-ball of yellow feathers.

Fascination was not left to the boy alone. His handsome face was responsible for the beginning of her quest; his manly body dictated the continuation.

The amplitude of his youthful maleness occupied her gaze. Gently, she took his free hand and pushed it across her silken belly and onto the feathery pout. Mula gasped. Every ounce of his strength was brought into power to keep his seed from issuing forth. The *chockta* had long since instructed him in the manner of female-male communion; but as yet he had not tasted of this rare experience with a woman. He was the chosen; his wives would have been carefully selected for him.

She led him to the awaiting tamarisk couch.

The sight of the reclining goddess recalled to his mind the manner of *chockta* instruction and his desire turned turgid with hot passion. Caroline helped him to crawl between her resilient legs and place his swollen member at the dewy edge of the puckering slit. Her eyes narrowed in eager excitement as the black and white touched, and without further foreplay she abruptly tilted up her pelvis, while pulling him down upon the rounded globes. He plunged into a euphoric cavern with her fingers massaging the tension ropes in his back and neck.

Mula burst, at last, and trembled and cried. For a moment he became again the youth who had not yet reached his fourteenth year. She cradled his head to her shoulder.

He awoke with a cool chill passing over his body and saw the sea breeze blowing the curtains into the room. He had been in her arms, against her large, white breasts . . . all night . . . locked in the same position they had fallen asleep.

As she awoke, rekindling the fire in his loins, he knew



that an important milestone had been reached—never again would his body be put upon by men—women, and only women, would ever again possess him.

On his twenty-first birthday, Mula could sum up his Berger life as “nothing to complain of” without really wondering whether it had been or hadn’t. From Caroline Tougcourt, and a variety of other European women, he had gained an education; both within and without their bed chambers. His life in exile had been resplendent—far better than what he could have expected as a King’s son in an Ashanti village.

“I like you better in the nude—you’re handsomer that way,” she sighed at last.

His answer was another kiss, to which he added: “Even my skin would parch under this sun.”

“It was foolish of us to ride out on such a day.”

“You brother wanted me to keep you away from Beni Saf for the day.”

“Or to keep me away from Margo Karsh?”

“Let’s not go into that again.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be so green-eyed. What is it that makes you so appealing to every white woman who comes to Beni Saf?”

“Does it take a black savage to tell you white women how you function? They think that you possess me and they are not content until they try to win away your prize.”

“But you seduce so easily.”

“Only when it pleases me.”

The moment was too sweet to allow any shadow to cloud it. The woman yielded to its spell without reserve. He returned his kisses willingly. They mounted and rode side by side over the dunes.

On the crest of the next hill the sea breeze brought the muffled boom of a cannon.

Instinctively they drew rein.

“The battle has begun,” Mula said casually.

A frown darkened her brow. "Why wasn't I told?"

"It is the way of the white men. We Ashanti arm our women when a major battle is at hand."

Caroline looked with quick surprise.

"Then this isn't a simple battle for a single ship?"

"No."

"You don't mean it? Father said the Americans would never attack; they were not strong enough."

"Then why get excited when you know the end before it begins?"

"Do you know the ending?"

"Yes."

"Victory?"

He laughed cynically: "Victory for your pompous, braggart father who sails his fleet far out of the battle line?"

"You are sure of defeat then?"

"Absolutely!"

Caroline looked at him with a flush of angry contempt.

"My father is counting on Sibi's defeat today?"

"Yes."

"Then it's true that he is not really trying to help him?"

"Why should he wish to sacrifice another British naval war with the Americans to save his pirate comrades? The defeat at New Orleans is still too fresh in the English mind to tangle anew with those daredevils."

"He is, in fact, defying the orders of Sibi, isn't he?"

"You might say that, if you strain a point," Mula admitted. "You might say he is a British Admiral first, a pirate second."

Again the long roar of guns boomed on the seascape horizon, louder, clearer. The dull echoes became continuous now, and the quickening breeze brought the faint din from the vast sea of death whose blazing smoke covered the pirate ships and harbor.

*Boom-boom-boom, boom! —boom! boom!*

Again they drew rein and listened.

Mula's brow wrinkled and his right ear was thrown slightly forward.

"Those are not our guns."

"How do you know those are not our guns?" Caroline asked with a quiver.

"We have none so large. They'll be into the city by nightfall."

Again an angry flush mounted her cheeks.

"You wish them to capture Beni Saf?"

"They are Americans. To them I might be a free man. My journey is far from over."

Caroline leaned closer and grasped his hand with trembling eagerness.

"Oh Mula—Mula, dear, this is madness! Why didn't you tell me sooner? I have money. We could have gone away to England."

"Not really. Would I be any more acceptable in London than I was two years ago? I was your pet monkey—to be gaped at, fondled, and sold to the highest bidder by your father. He wouldn't have his fine new fleet if I hadn't seduced half the daughters and wives of his foes. Besides, Sibi scuttled most of the boats last night. He's far into the desert by now."

"That is base betrayal!"

"Any more than your father pulling back the protective umbrella of his fleet?"

"I call it treachery—the betrayal of us for his selfish ambition! I'm surprised that you sympathize with him."

"He didn't take me with him. How can I not sympathize with a man who has virtually set me free? The Americans will not respect your hold over me, only Sibi's."

She looked at him with quick, eager yearning.

"Rodger! Rodger is still in Beni Saf. Will you do something for me?" she begged.

"What is it?"

"Will you take me to Beni Saf? Rodger is my brother, Mula. I know he's treated you badly, but I must save

Mula shot her a look of angry amazement.

"You can't mean this? If we are not killed by the cannonade, we'll surely be slaughtered by the Beni Safians. They won't hold lightly to Sibi's running out on them, and they will blame your father for the destruction of their city. Rodger knew the risk he was running by staying behind."

"As you please," was the cold reply.

He bit his lips without turning and was silent. She touched her horse with her whip and galloped swiftly toward the city.

She was within sight of the gates; Mula close upon her flank, when they were brought up short by rifle balls whizzing past their heads.

"Get off the damn horse," he shouted.

Before she could subdue the rearing beast, four angry Marines dashed from behind a dune, all yelling at them at once.

"Put away those silly firearms," Caroline demanded angrily.

"Who in thunder are you? What the hell yah doin' here in the middle a' battle?" A red-bearded non-commissioned officer growled.

"Me! What am I doing here? What are you doing here? I am Lady Caroline Tougcourt. Daughter of Lord Jessup Tougcourt, Admiral of His Majesty's Royal Mediterranean Fleet."

"By cracky," a toothless youth jumped up and down boyishly. "Boys, we done got ourselves one of dem real limey type cunts."

"Ain' she just grand?"

"Hey, Elmer, s'pose dey screw lak our Georgia peaches?"

"Hot diggity damn, dat am a thought. S'pose she's been gibben a piece t' dat fancy dressed nigger boy?"

"Naw, Zeke, she'd get sand up her arse."

"Stop it!" Mula boomed. "Stop it, I say, at once. That's an improper way to talk in front of Lady Caroline."

The four boys from the 4th Georgia Marines stood as

though turned to salt pillars. The corporal was the first to find his words: "If dat don't beat all. Dis 'ere blacky sounds more limey dan dat skirt. Git off'n dat horse, boy, 'n let us take a look at yah. My ain' dem some fancy trappins."

"Hey, Elmer, maybe he's one od dem Aye-rab she-hes we been hearin' bout."

"Jist neber yah mind, pecker-head. He's a prisoner 'n we're takin' him *as is* t'da Capt'n."

"Awh, Corp, have a heart. Let's shack em both up. Ah ain' had a darky lip round my joint since leavin' 'Lanta."

"Can it, Marine! Ya'all gettin' off'n dat horse?"

Mula swung down from the horse. It was not in character. He towered over the quartet, seeming more their master than captive. He was not oppressed by them, but more an oppressor, a hunter, a pursuer. Mula's quarry was Merritt Frazer. They had mentioned the mystical word—Georgia. Merritt's retreating tracks, up to that point, were clear. Beyond that point they vanished into the Georgia timberland. He went with them peaceably. He could hardly understand their strange language, but they represented a step closer to Georgia.

For no apparent reason, Captain Jethro Heatherton, applied Caroline Tougcourt with an escort back to Beni f. Standing on the white Mediterranean sand, by the long boats, he considered Mula at length.

To no one in particular he said: "A fine specimen. Good broad shoulders, fine physique, good legs and . . ." He reached forward, his hand clutching at Mula's crotch. . . . he's well hung." The importation of slaves was illegal, he knew, but how his Georgia farm could use a stud like this.

"Cramer!" he barked.

"Sir!" a burly sailor called from the long boat.

"Put this captive aboard. Tell the ship's captain that he shall be my personal servant until we reach America."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Mula watched the coast. There it was before him—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, the edge of a colossal land—America. Every day the coast looked like a new thing, though they had seen it all before, but they passed waiting ports. At last the coast of Peru appeared, and the

The Marine seemed pleased. Made to a long boat, covering his legs from waist with tan oil-clothes. Once aboard he was hastily escorted to a closed carriage. Day and night they travelled southward. Nowhere did they stop long enough for Mule to get a particularly impressive view of the new land, but the general sense of vigor and aggressive western grew upon him. It was like a weary wilderness enough here for nightmen. He was being taken deeper and deeper than ever before.

In a country village he was turned over to a farmer. He was a young man, lean, thin, and motionless, with lank hair and a snuffling gait. The only love was his tin. It was aground of sharp days before John was again loaded upon a wagon, his body badly torn by the tramp life. As they left the miserable little farm, he cursed his land contemporaries of John. "Been here" was high on the heavy, rugged. My hair ain't got a lock of sense hanging out a dandy like you. Wish you got farm land" said the old man.

They [owners] a long string of masters. These were sympathetic masters, cruel masters, uninterested masters. Through each sale Mula remained mute, uncooperative. He refused to work, because he didn't know how to work. He couldn't be sold to the better plantations, for he had no papers. His British accent marked him as an illegal entry as surely as if he spoke only Tishi. There was only one market left open to dispose of him—the St. Johns River station.

Mula walked with the slaver through the piteous horde of chained unfortunates, and his stomach revolted. Most of the women were contemptuous. Their bodies were flabby and covered with lice sores. They sat in the hot

filth of the open yard watching Mula shuffle along, keeping his eyes ahead vigilantly.

The slaver would stoop every few feet, grab a handful of hair, yank the face upward for Mula to see. Some he would utter to maid and turn around. Mula could see the misery and resignation in their eyes. He could not believe that he was expected to play and to this damned lot.

They came to a walled enclosure. There he saw a different scene. Three women were young, voluptuous, completely indifferent to the salacious murmurings from the other backs. Mula edged to the wire, watching. A man came and saw him and held his gaze. The slaver saw him, pointed, laughed, and the man turned.

"They are wild, hey. You'll can't get your pocket full of bitch, of muggin' cuts. Day all belong to Master Frazer of Moral. You belong to me, and the black bitch is on the side of the fence."

Mula's heart was pounding. His face froze into an indifferent mask. It was best not to reveal his desperation.

Mula had to wait in the station for ten days—no security. He lived in a hut in the yard, but would not touch the other women who were sent to him nightly.

It was hot there, big flies buzzed incessantly and did not sting, but rubbed. At twilight he sat generally near the wind coming from the silent, cold mud.

One evening he remarked, without lifting his head, "In your new place you will no doubt meet Master Frazer." On the stud asking who Frazer was, he said he was a cruel man. Further questions elicited from Mula that he had a *banu*, a personal vendetta with the man.

Their talk was interrupted by a growing murmur of voices and a great tramping of feet. A slave ship had come in. A violent babel of uncouth sounds burst out from all quarters of the station. All the slaves were speaking together, and in the midst of the uproar the lamentable voice of the slave agent was heard ordering the Frazer slaves moved out.

"My friend," Mula nearly gasped in near panic, "be a

brother. Help me with my *banu*. The wire is loose. Let us trade places."

He stared at Mula for a moment with his fierce, bulging eyes.

"I am not alone. My two women must go where I go. I am an expensive stud-man."

The voices outside were calming down. Mula was desperate. He stomped through his section of the station. Women, women, everywhere; and no suitable replacement for the stud's two wives.

The gate suddenly swung open. Black figures strolled listlessly into the deepening shadows. Mula's heart beat furiously when he caught sight of the two girls; they were Ashanti. He returned to his hut, his pulse ticking off the passing minutes. He blew out the candle suddenly, and went outside. The moon had risen. The new pilgrims could be seen in knots gesticulating, discussing. Several had still the chains on their ankles. Mula strained to see if the Ashanti girls were thus encumbered, and became crestfallen all at once. Beyond the girls he could see that the Frazer compound was nearly empty.

Beyond the fence the forest stood up spectrally in the moonlight, and through the dim stir, through the faint sounds of that lamentable courtyard, Mula made himself known to Queeda and Asha. Their faces mirrored the mystery, the greatness, the amazing reality that their prince was among them. They followed him without question.

". . . No, it is impossible. It is impossible."

Mula strained to see the other black face in the shifting moonlight. Great banks of clouds were moving in swiftly from the west. He pleaded with his adversary, but gained back only silence. Another group of Frazer slaves were removed to the waiting wagons.

It had become so pitch dark that the six blacks could hardly see one another. For a long time, Mula had been no more to them than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but he was awake. Another was also awake. The stud lis-



tened, listened for the sentence, the word, that would give him the clue to put a price on his own flesh. This other black was handsomely dressed, he reflected, although tattered and near wore out. He had come from a rich master, perchance. Smart blacks could always gain from a rich master. The question of money seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night air of the river.

Mula cut away the tops of his boots, forcing out from between the heavy leather fifty gold coins. The black hand did not pull back. From the second boot came an additional fifty—his entire savings.

As Mula climbed beneath the wire, the clouds parted. He stood there for a moment in the moonlight with his handsome face set a little askew, and his black eyes glittering without a wink, then, with a curt "Goodbye," he strode off with the Ashanti girls. He clambered on board the flat wagon, unmindful of the clamps set about his ankles—they were only temporary.

He had given up worrying himself about the end of the road. He had had plenty of time for meditation, and through the long years he had given thought to Merritt and Porterhouse, again and again. Now came the test. He was curious to see whether this man, who had sold him into slavery, would set him free.

# ALINA'S BOOK

## *Chapter I*

The harrowing journey was over. It seemed as though long years had passed since the day when he had been taken away from home. He had suffered privations enough for a lifetime since then. More than once his life had hung by a slender thread.

Now he was eager for the confrontation. He respected Merritt, in spite of all, for enduring the ritual of silence. There was no vital need for another running from Merritt. He would not have run that first day had he been mentally prepared to once again face his fate as a slave. He had so believed the words of Porterhouse, and fully expected Merritt to immediately set him free. The frightened look that had crossed the other man's face upon spying him in the wagon had turned his heart cold. He knew he would never be free and had fled.

He had often asked himself during the length of his journey whether a reminder would be borne in on his senses, and awaken them to a throb of familiarity. That day he had climbed down from the wagon, he was filled with an oppressing consciousness that he might be stepping into a new world—or an old and forgotten world. Merritt's chains told him what world it was to be.

Before him stretched the broad, columned verandah of Meral House. A servant had lit an improbable bonfire, and the smell of burnt pine-cones drifted with the echoes of the hand clapping. Only the gamecocks, hobbling fussily around his chaining post, seemed disposed to

move. Nkumula Prempehumasi, his big boots crunching on the gravel, had nowhere to go.

His boots were of a heavy brown brogue and much repaired at the welts. He wore a stained, foreign-cut costume. This, plus the strange lilt to his tongue, and a single word uttered by Queeda and Asha, had spread through the plantation with telegraphic speed. That he was Ashanti was not questioned.

Unseen eyes saw him as a big, lumbering man, fuzzy-haired, handsome faced and duskily dark; with high shoulders and tapered fingers like a warrior. He moved about the restraining pole with the thrusting slowness of a lion; a broad, aggressive, king-of-the-jungle walk. His age was hard for them to guess. When the adonis face was soft, untroubled, he could alarm with a teenage quality. As the features hardened to mistrust and hate, his countenance doubled its normal twenty-two years.

Now, as he rested his back against the rough-hewn pole, the bonfire bathed him in an almost effulgent whiteness. The shadows of the plantation were inky in contrast, and the disused and ancient ship's anchor, planted at the driveway edge for a hitching post, stood out boldly in relief. But the plantation was silent and except for himself, seemed absolutely deserted.

For a time, he stood looking at the curtained window of Merritt's study. From somewhere at his back, in the city like tangle of white-washed cabins, drifted the heavy pungency of pork cooking with chick-peas.

His ears were alert for the sounds that might, in their drifting inconsequence, mean everything. Then, he heard something like a subdued ejaculation, and opened his eyes upon a startling spectacle.

Leaning out from the shadow of the verandah abutment stood a thin woman, whose face in the firelight showed a strange mingling of savagery and terror. He took her to be an old woman. She wore a simple brown dress, high up around her neck. Her hair was severely pulled taut across the scalp and caught at the nape of the

neck in a tight bun. It was the first time Mula had conceived of Merritt possessing a wife—a family.

"I presume," Alina Frazer said icily, "you wish to enjoy the sensation of keeping this plantation in a state of turmoil?" The shadowy figure paused, and then began afresh, her voice charged with a bravado that somehow seemed to lack genuineness.

"From what my father said, I expected to find a god chained without; you're little more than another black man. Last time, you expected my father to set you free—and went away to enslavement. This time, you expected to run to safety, and, instead, you've been put in chains."

It was a neatly phrased summary, telling him that this mousey specimen was Merritt's daughter, and also bearing out Porterhouse's words on the desert: *the man fears your supernatural powers.*

"All chains are temporary," Mula said evenly.

Alina looked at him steadily, almost insultingly, with deep blue eyes, then laughed.

"It is quite a shock to hear a black man speak with such a heavy British accent."

"No more so than to hear the guttural mouthings of your American English."

"If I were a man," she said coldly, "I'd whip you."

"It would not be the first time."

She looked at him bitterly and said, "If you think your educated glibness will win you a place at Meral, you're mighty mistaken."

He was disgusted with her. He was used to the charm and sophistication of Caroline Tougcourt and her manner of women. This ungainly American woman was irritating, and he said something he knew would hurt her womanly vanity: "You speak of a place for me . . . what of yourself? When the years pass, you'll be old. Has any man dared to warm your cold bed?"

She blushed angrily, blood coursing across her face. Only then, with her face flooded with color, did he see a spark of beauty.

"You beast," she snarled. "You're still a jungle savage."

"Any man is at his best among his own kind, his own people . . . and his own religion. We are beasts because we are torn away from our own world."

"We treat our people well," she temporized.

He laughed. "I'm standing here in an alien world, with a woman I've not even met, and yet I'm thinking: she's the slave."

"Hardly a slave."

"Oh? I was brought here in wagons driven by black men; the men who chased me were black men, and even black men chained me to this pole. Other than your father, and another young white man, you're the only other white person I've seen on this plantation. The only white woman. There must be a reason why you look more like his wife than daughter."

"I don't see how that should concern you."

"It doesn't. But I cannot help but keep thinking: that poor daughter of the slaver. The years will pass and she'll be stuck in this stud farm. And she'll be old. And she'll have missed the whole meaning." Cunningly, he looked at her sadly, knowing full well that he had hit upon her tender spot. His knowing women, and their weakness for vanity, had gained him much in the past, perhaps it would work again, even against Merritt Frazer.

"You're living in the middle of a reproductive farm," he continued, "and you're already prematurely middle-aged and unloved. Granted, the suckers are born potential slaves, but even the mating that produces them is not without a certain degree of human sexual emotion. People, even slaves, cannot long survive without love."

"Love is for fools, and I find you to be the biggest fool I've ever met. There are ways of making you do our bidding, without this silly game my father plays with you."

"You can force me to remain at this institution, even to bed with every wench you possess, but you will never break my will for seeking the freedom that is rightfully mine."

A scowl crossed her face—a harsh, belligerent scowl—

and she could not kid herself into thinking that she was dealing with an average Negro fresh from the slave market. This was a man! A black man like she had never met before.

They stared at each other for some time and he saw in her eyes hatred, bitterness and confusion. But as he continued to look at her, those ugly attributes vanished and he saw merely the appealing gaze of an attractive, perplexed young woman.

"Get away from him," a voice commanded from the darkness. "Get back to the house, Alina!"

"This is no longer just your battle, father. It has disrupted the entire plantation."

"Damn you, girl! Mess out of my affair." An almost deranged Merritt Frazer raced to the bonfire's umbra. His voice was tremulous with emotion, yet the tone was intended to convey irony, and was partly successful. But there was nothing ironic about the ten inch flint-lock pistol he carried against his breast.

"I should have killed you in Africa. Your execution was only delayed." He gave a short, nervous laugh, then his voice came near breaking as he went on wildly: "I've got to kill you, Mula. I must have security from your power! I know you'll never forgive a wrong—and God knows I never did you the wrong you are trying to revenge."

Mula thought bitterly of his dead mother, his lost freedom.

"I am innocent," Merritt shouted, then halted breathless, and stood with his wide chest rising and falling almost hysterically. He was in the state when men are most irresponsible and dangerous.

Meanwhile, the pistol held in an unsteady hand, its cock at the ready-point, the trigger under an uncertain finger, emphasized a situation that called for sane thinking. The only course was to meet the other's bravado with a counter show of bravado, and work on the girl's humanitarianism.

"Well," demanded Merritt between gasping breaths,

"why in the hell don't you say something? You seemed to have plenty to jaw about with my daughter."

Here was the key. Mula began to feel the mastery of the strong man over the weaker, despite the fact that the weaker supplemented his inferiority with a weapon.

"It appears to me," came the answer, and it was the first time Merritt had heard the English speaking voice at close range, now almost velvety. "It appears to me that there isn't much for me to say. You seem to be in the best position to do the talking."

"Yes, damn you!" accused Merritt, excitedly. "You are always the same—new language or not—always making the big pyrotechnic display! You have used your black magic and posed as the leader of your people, until it's come to be second nature. That won't help now!" The overly tired man's braggadocio changed suddenly to something like a whine. It was a side of her father that Alina had never before seen. She feared for his sanity.

"You think I'm frightened, and you're throwing a bluff. You're a fool not to realize that it's because I'm not frightened of you as a man that I am capable of killing you. I'm still white—you're black. Who sent you here? How did you find me? No, don't tell me. It doesn't matter because I'm going to end it."

"Father, calm yourself," Alina cautioned with growing alarm.

"Hush! I can see it all plainly as if it were printed on a glass pane. Listen to his voice—British. There is nothing they would love more than to ruin farms like mine, so they can once again control the slave trade through the Bahamas. He's a spy. They've taken him from exile with his father and turned him into a spy. If I let him live, he'll inform the government."

Here, at least, Mula could speak, and speak truthfully.

"I know nothing, nor care anything, about your farm," he retorted, curtly.

"That's a damn lie!" almost shrieked the older man. "It's just their style. It's just the infernal British chican-



ery. I paid Porterhouse in good faith, and you traced me through him. You found out where I was and what I was doing. It would be easy for you to go to work for them; you feel you have a *banu*. You think you can give me the same sort of death your mother experienced. But it's too late. You are my prisoner again." Merritt's voice became almost triumphant. Mula noted the look of caution in Alina's face. He must start fighting for his own survival. Revenge would come with time—if he remained alive.

"I neither know, nor want to know, anything about your dirty work," he said shortly. Mula, with strong effort, collected his senses. "Why do you think I came for vengeance?"

"Why do I think it?" Merritt laughed bitterly. "Why indeed? What except necessity or implacable vengeance could bring a black man to this part of Georgia? And you—you with freedom and money to live richly in your own land, whose very black face in these states invites enslavement! What else could bring you? But I guess I always knew you'd come—and, so help me God, I'm innocent."

Mula was perplexed. A sudden idea struck him.

"What do you want me to believe were the real facts?" he demanded, with an assumption of the cold incredulity that seemed expected of him.

Merritt spoke eagerly.

"That day when I turned you over to Porterhouse, I went away disgusted with myself. A man, black or white, has no right to consort with his own gender, especially with an innocent child. I went back to Porterhouse, bought your freedom, and left him with ample money to see you back to your people in exile."

Mula felt that, until he had learned the full story, he must remain silent. Accordingly, he allowed himself a skeptical laugh. Merritt, stung by the implied disbelief, took up his argument again:

"You think I'm lying. It sounds too fishy! Of course,

slaving was my enterprise. For me to have sacrificed a lad to his depravity would have been infamous, bit I didn't do it."

Through the bitterness of conviction, a part of Mula's brain seemed to be looking on impersonally and marveling, almost with amusement, at the remarkable position in which he found himself. Here stood a man before him with a pistol; threatening execution, denouncing, cursing, yet all the while giving evidence of his state of freedom. Is that what Porterhouse had meant? If only he had proof of those words. And, as Mula stood listening, it dawned on him, in the despair of the moment, that it was of small concern to himself whether or not he had once been granted freedom—his heart and body still bore the scars of the evilness of man. The story sickened Mula, coming to him as it did in a form he could no longer disbelieve. Once again he was the slave of this man. He raised his head despairingly.

"You may believe me or not," the black man said apathetically, "but I have tried to forget all the unnaturalness Porterhouse submitted upon my body. I have no resentment, no wish for vengeance," he lied. "I knew not that you had set me free, though Porterhouse alluded to it upon his death. You might say he sent me to you, after selling me to the Bergers. What you wished to save me from, is what they desired most from me; until I was taken over by an English woman. It has been a strange journey since then. You say you set me free, and now I find myself again your chattel. The two facts do not live in harmony."

"I told you," said Merritt in a dull voice, "that I cannot allow you to live."

"Nor can you kill him, father," Alina said with new found strength. "They know he is Ashanti. Didn't you hear them throughout the night? Right now their eyes are watching this confrontation with eager anticipation. You put a ball through his heart and we'd both be dead before the sun came up."

As she spoke, Merritt's head dropped forward on his chest, and he stood breathing heavily.

"What can I do?" he almost whimpered.

"Set me free," Mula said calmly.

"That I cannot do. I paid five thousand dollars for the stud you replaced."

Mula almost laughed. A moment before Merritt was willing to kill him in cold blood, but the thought of releasing him brought a price tag back around his neck.

"Then use him to your advantage," Alina counseled. "Our people are expecting a new stud-man. His life should be worth something to him. He is educated, masterful . . . they will follow him like no stud-man has ever before been able to control them. You granted him freedom once . . . for a price you could do it again. Make him earn the five thousand dollars he has cost us."

When Merritt at last raised his face and spoke again, the astonishment was greater than ever. He was suddenly an old man.

"Take the gun," he said to his daughter, raising his hand slowly, and presenting the weapon stock first. "You are right, as always."

Mula, for an instant, suspected some base subterfuge; then, looking into the eyes before him, he realized that they were the eyes of a man who was tired of life. He could not fathom the meaning, but he realized that from this man he had nothing to fear. She was the real master of Meral. He was going to live and, suddenly he knew Merritt's Achilles heel. As Merritt had hurt him, by taking away his mother, he would hurt Merritt, by slowly taking away his daughter.

## *Chapter II*

For more than a week after his release from the pole, Alina withdrew herself from the orbit in which Mula revolved, and the black man, feeling that she wished to establish a master-slave relationship, at least in part, stayed close within the slave area.

It had been a week of startling revelation for Mula. He had always considered that the enslavement of his people would be harsh, cruel, killing their will and pride, as it had been on the other plantations during his journey. At Meral he found life to be little different than on the African veld. They were not free to move away from the plantation, nor had they been allowed to go away from their native villages or tribes. The King's word had been law, here that power was vested in the "massa," "oba'seer," and "stud-man."

Mula had instinctively liked the small Spanish "oba'seer" upon their first meeting. Orlando treated Mula like a male of equal standing. It had given Mula "m'butu"—standing—among the other slaves.

Each day Orlando showed Mula a different aspect of the sprawling plantation. The fields were expertly tended, the buildings kept brilliantly white-washed.

By day, their garments clinging wetly to their skins, their faces blue-black in the shadow of their big straw hats, the people of Meral would cultivate the fields for cotton, corn, collard, chick-peas, pole beans, wheat and fodder; tend the cattle, chickens, hogs and dairy herd;

work as carpenters, blacksmiths, cobblers, millers, dairymen; serve as house maids, cooks, or children tenders.

At eventide, the air fragrant with the aroma of tantalizing, enriching food, they came from the fields; entering their individual cabins for the daily ritual of bathing if they were counted among the "married slaves," or to the larger dormitory cabins reserved for the unwed bucks. The "virgins" were assigned to the cabins of the older, married women; not so much for the continuation of her virginity, but for a semblance of parental guidance.

Eating, except for the main house, overseer's home, and stud-man's cabin, was a communal affair—a happy hour as though they had never stumbled and fallen down the chained path to slavery. So long divorced from the company of his own people, Mula forewent the solitary meals in his cabin and strolled from wooden table to wooden table. He laughed, he talked, he joked. He saw stout buxom matrons, ample of breast; young wenches, some great with child; proud, straight-backed young bucks, their breast plate like a mass of iron, their smiles flashing bright ivory; the older men and women, the glint to their eyes recalling how their youth had been spent—and children. Children of all ages; dancing, singing, romping, playing, loving and being loved.

It mattered not that they were not all of the same tribe—even here ancient enemies were suddenly brothers under the same yoke. To the Fanti's among them he bore no grudge. They had sent his people into slavery, only to be turned upon by yet a stronger tribe and put into bondage.

He counted seven different tribes who had at one time killed each other, enslaved one another, and now lived in harmony. It was a long way from the huts in the forest, remote villages on the plains, platform homes built in the mangrove trees, mud and log circular cabins beside fish laden streams. For some it had been years since they had made love beneath the banyan trees. For some the old world meant nothing but words, for they had been a seed

grown upon this new ground. To this generation the tongues of the tribes were alien sounds to their ears, their only language being the strange invention of English words created by those who had come before them.

When they first heard the strange tongue in which Mula spoke they looked at him with anguished eyes. Only a few hundred of the slaves understood his Tshi words. It was even worse when he spoke his British style English. To the hundreds of upturned faces came a mask of distrust.

"*Mi amigos*," Orlando would say with each introduction. "This man has the education of the white people. He shall be your new stud-man."

The smiles would broaden—"he was with knowledge." Faces would peer at Mula—faces running from midnight black to doe-skin beige; faces blue-black, honey-white, ivory, cream and even pink-white—but two faces were missing.

"Where are Queeda and Asha?" he asked Orlando.

"They are gone."

"Gone?"

"The morning you were released. Miss Alina had me sell them to the Fennell brothers."

Mula smiled. The game continued. Merritt could try and keep the knowledge from the people of Meral that he was in truth Nkumula Prempehumasi—one who lives free as the son of our king—but that he could read, write, understand the "massa's" way of thinking stood him in greater realm than his princely rank.

Orlando had been refraining from showing Mula the cabins that lay deep within the far pine grove. It was no mystery what they represented. Nightly, Mula would sit upon the wooden steps of his cabin and watch the couples divorce themselves from the congregation. One, two, three . . . he would count off the couples, always ending with twelve. There was no forcing, no demanding, no chains, no whips. It was all as natural as life itself. He began watching faces, noting that several of the bucks made the journey nightly, but never with the

same wench. Was it all done by chance, he wondered. Surely, he thought, left to such open lustfulness there must seethe under the surface a molten cauldron that would some day erupt into open rebellion by some hot-headed lovers.

His wonderment was soon dispelled.

"My friend," Orlando started cautiously. "Almost a week you have been among us. You have seen the fields, the smokehouses, the barns, the shops. These are but the means of survival. Each day your people work to make their place in our society. Soon you must take your place as their stud-man."

"How soon is soon?"

"Life is very simple here, my friend. I've seen you eye the travel down that narrow path, but never with a lustful leer. It must seem very ordinary—young couples strolling off two by two. Believe me, Mula, it is not so simple. It is a year since we've had a worthy stud-man. Of late we have let them go off as they saw fit, but it cannot continue. We must get back to an orderly schedule."

"Schedule?"

"Twelve cabins . . . twelve matings an evening. Eleven cabins if the stud-man wishes to nightly show his great power."

"Very clinical," Mula scoffed.

"Not so. It has certain problems . . . problems that will be yours to control and solve. A couple may marry only after consulting with you and then gaining permission from myself and Master Frazer."

"A black matchmaker," Mula laughed. "And what of the blood lines?"

"I do not follow."

"Are they allowed to mate as they see fit."

"More or less."

"Foolish. I would never allow it in Africa. You can't mix the blood of a Bantu with an Ashanti, nor two of the same tribe unless separated by three generations."

"With a full tribe that may be possible. We are but a

thousand strong. How can you keep the weak strains out?"

"By making them stronger."

Orlando looked at his feet. "Wise words . . . except," he stammered, "for a stud-man to be a rightful leader . . . he . . . ah . . . must lead."

There was an uncomfortable silence between the two men.

"When am I to begin making the breeds stronger?"

"Tonight. Cabin ten shall be yours."

"Her name?"

"Lea."

"But she is . . ."

"Miss Alina's house-girl? Yes! But she is also a virgin. Your people demand a virgin for their new stud-man. She was selected by Mama Zella, not by me."

Mula would not admit to the Spaniard why his stomach knotted into an aching thing. He must consent or run afoul of his plan.

It would have been easier had he not seen Alina that evening. At twilight the falling sun made her blond hair shine like gold, and even with her pretended, stark primness, she knew she was a beauty among the dark people, for she carried herself like his mother had approached life: with a regal stride. But she was not alone in her beauty, for beside her with matching stride and coal-black hair sauntered Lea, her maid. Seeing the two women side by side, with no more than four years separating them, he knew what troubled him—he had never before lain with a woman of his own race. Arab, Berger, English, Dutch, German, Austrian—yes, but never with a black, or near black. And he also knew how strong was growing his desire for Alina Frazer. Her father could turn her into an old maid for the eyes of the county boys, but Mula saw beyond the pretense. Smoldering, longing, fighting under the cold, prime exterior was a hidden beauty, a wantonness that screamed to be released from her voluptuous body, held in check by whale-bone stays and flattening straps. He had to prove to her that he



was not a savage beast, but how could he do that when he must fulfill his position by wenching with her personal maid?

Cabin ten was barely more than a six by eight foot split log shack. The floor was pounded earth, holding upon its surface little more than a bunk bed and small table. A single candle and flint-box were the only ornaments. The bunk was fitted with a straw mattress and Lea.

She lay on her back, eyes closed, arms ram-rod at her sides with fists clenched. From a giggling pig-tailer, he would have taken it as a sure sign of virginity; from Lea it was gross overacting. He lifted away the blanket she trembled beneath, revealing the dark drift of curls covering her peach-shaped mound, and she did not whimper. He lifted her legs apart, and she did not resist.

As a hundred times before he climbed between the soft, feminine legs, positioned himself, took aim and plunged. There was no cry, no ear shattering scream, no rending of flesh. He forced himself deeper. She winced, but refused to cry out. He took up a steady pump, slamming his powerful thighs against her; he felt the lithe frame go tight, felt the smooth vagina tighten around his mighty organ as if trying to push it out.

"Who is he?" Mula demanded. She refused to answer. He bore deeper, making her gasp with each massive thrust.

"Tell me who broke you!"

"Ah cain't," she cried. "Ain't fittin'. He'd kill me, sur'ah."

"But you'd call yourself a virgin for the stud-man?"

"Ya'all seems lak' amighty fine gen'man, massa. Don' yah go gettin' Lea inta no tro'bah. Ain't de same as if'n t'were a niggah boy."

"Master Frazer?" He growled.

"No suh! Not him. He am a mean one, he am."

It couldn't be Orlando, Mula knew. All the people regarded him as one of their own kind. My God, he shuddered, there was only one other white man within a fifteen mile radius—Alivin Frazer. This posed a strange

problem for Mula. Her pliant vagina spoke of almost constant intercourse. He could not allow her to bring forth a white issue. He slammed harder into her cove.

She resisted, tightening her hips. He slammed them flat onto the mattress. "Cooperate, you little bitch, or I'll not keep silent about Master Alvin."

She did not need to relax. The last frantic, impaling thrust had released him from his seed. He withdrew, angry with life for placing him in yet another untenable position.

### *Chapter III*

Lea, whose tears were from shame—shame that she had to submit to the brutish new stud-man—stopped weeping as soon as Mula departed. It would be hours before Alvin came to her, hours during which the other cabins would fulfill their mission and be vacated.

They had always been able to count on the cabins being deserted by ten o'clock—at the most midnight. It was ironic that they had always selected this same cabin, number ten. It was their little world. Even now she could feel the tenderness of his hands, lifting her onto their first mating couch—she had been fourteen.

Most of her life had been spent around Alvin, yet never once had she ever realized how accustomed she had become of the young man with the round, pleasant face. During their first young days at Meral he had taught her to ride. Later, the bloom of youth changing them daily, they would steal away to the Withlachochee, unmindful of the difference in their nude bodies as they swam in its tranquil waters.

Now, her body matured to young womanhood, neither could recall when first they would sneak out of their beds at night and run down to the mating cabins and lay side by side, awake half the night telling each other make-believe stories. And as Alvin grew into his late teens the burning in his loins became a terrible thing. He knew what transpired within the cabins, but it was always black with black. When his seed was dropping

nightly, from natural biological need, his prurient dreams always centered on Lea's supple young body; he could stand the strain no longer.

He was a gentle lover; she the animal, brutally leaving him bruised, scratched and sore.

Only a divine hand, and the late maturing of her reproductive organs, kept their constant communion from developing an issue.

That evening Lea's wait was interminable. The moon was far over the yard-arm before the leather hinges squeaked open the cabin door. By an innocent stratagem Lea drew Alvin's attention to the condition of her bleeding vagina. The shock sent him into a wild rage.

"Why didn' you tell me you'd been picked?" He demanded, his voice thick with the accent of the people he lived among.

"I'se scar'd ta, massa Al'bin."

"Dat niggah ain' ne'ba gonna touch you again, Lea."

"Wat ya'all gwine ta do?"

"Jest ne'ba you mind. Ya'all stay put till ah gits back, he'air?"

He was gone before she could answer. Fear ate at her in nervous gulps as she realized the dangerous situation she was creating.

Like a pole-cat, stalking its night prey, Alvin skittered between the long rows of slave cabins. He stopped but once, at the blacksmith shop.

The plantation was deathly still. A lone night owl screeched far off. The door made no noise upon opening.

The black giant lay deathlike on the wooden bunk, a muscled arm flung rakishly across his forehead.

The white boy swung down with the iron rod with a vengeance. The hard metal glanced off the knotted forearm, barely grazing the thick skull. It was a moment of nightmare for Mula—but only a moment. A searing flash of pain took him momentarily from the world.

With the beginning of painful awareness he rolled to the dirt floor and was attempting to rise when Alvin

came down on top of him, feet first. Again the world turned to blackness.

When next his vision began to focus he found his hands amateurishly tied to the plank foot-board of the bunk.

"Ya'all picked on de wrong gal, black boy," Alvin sneered grimly. "Lea's mine, he'air!"

Mula refused to speak.

"Ah think you need to be taught a lesson in manners, niggah. Round dese parts when a white man speaks, a blacky snaps to attention so fast you can hear his ass-hole pucker."

The nerve ends quivered through the length of his muscular body as Alvin revealed a length of black bull-whip.

The first bite of the attack bit at the center of Mula's pubic mound. Acute pain coursed through his whole body, sending blinding flashes across his eyes.

Every time he tried to move, the whip shot to another part of his genitals. Abounding pain was draining the power from his massive frame and then the whip touched at his scrotum with such fierceness that it kindled a savagery long dormant.

Then, Alvin did a foolish thing and left himself unguarded. He came a few steps nearer, and pressed the whip handle against Mula's chest, his own eyes glaring into those of his captive.

"Ah'm gonna kill you, boy, fur stickin' your dirty prick into my gal."

In an instant, the warrior had jammed his feet through the slighter man's legs, flipping him off balance. The whip clattered to the hard dirt. As it struck, Mula swept it backward with his other foot and, tore away his hand restraints.

Alvin leaped frantically to his feet, and stood for a moment contemplating his adversary. Mula now possessed the iron-bar, whip, and stood between Alvin and the open door. Alvin's lower jaw dropped, and he remained trembling, almost idiotic of mien. Then, as Mula stood

fingering the weapons, the young white drew himself up with dignity.

"We boff die, niggah, if'n you kill me," he said simply.

"Don't be an ass!" Mula said in a dull voice. "If I intended killing you, you'd already be dead."

"Dat's right smart."

"Smarter than this little stunt of yours. I didn't ask to lay with Lea, or any other wench on this plantation."

"But ya did, anyhow!"

"Naturally. Just like a cōw is sired, no more. That seems to be the manner in which your father runs this whorehouse establishment. And like a bull who won't go to the pen, he finds himself a dinner steak at the next meal. I didn't relish such a fate."

Alvin felt uncomfortable. He'd never met a black man who possessed a greater degree of education that he had gained. He could not fathom where this would all lead.

"But you didn't hav'ta stick her. Yah could have faked it."

"No I couldn't! What would your father do if she gave birth to a mulatto?"

"Kill me, fur sur'ah."

"Exactly. I don't give a damn how much you pecker around. I don't desire your wench. I don't desire any wench. I'll do my job, but not if it means running afoul of your father."

"But it never happened before."

"She's never been fully ripe before. You can't fool these black mid-wives. Mama Zella wouldn't have selected her for me unless she felt sure that the mating would produce with a single contact. How many times have you been with her in the last month?"

"Every night."

"Stupid bastard! You'd better start praying that it's my seed, and not yours, that takes its root."

"And you'd betta start prayin' I don' have yah whipped fur your sharp tongue."

"Be my guest! But don't be a damn fool. Stay out of the girl until we can see if she's with child. If she pops

forth with a black child, then I don't give a damn how much you screw her, as long as you're careful. If it's white . . . well . . . let's not think about that now. Your only protection is for us to keep this whole situation quiet."

Alvin made no reply. He was wondering how to apologize. He had never been forced to back down to a black man. His mind was a jumble of might-have-beens. Someday he would be expected to repay this debt.

"Ah jest might wait, boy; but don' think this is the last of this, 'tween us. My paw would understand. He's no angel, you know. Why, he shacked up with Yorie for years. He's no stranger to the dark meat."

Mula began to laugh in a ribald way. "That's the wide difference between master and slave, king and subject, father and son. I dare say that the snobbish view might be that your father sets himself apart from all others. For him to wench with the black gals is his due; for you to do it would be a mortal sin. You must do as he says, but not what he does."

"I . . . I think I understand. But don' think this lets you off." Alvin stomped from the cabin. The anger he felt toward Mula turned to anger against himself. He, too, began to laugh. He suddenly realized he had always feared his father. He had never loved him, that he knew. Merritt had always been distant, a stranger. He had not thought of Merritt, consciously, during the past few years. The separation from white people, so hard to endure at first, had become something he could almost fold to himself for perverse comfort; and the anticipation of seeing Lea, which had been all there was to live on during his younger years, had fallen into place along a quiet horizon of the future. He couldn't even say that he hated his father. How can one hate what one doesn't even know? It was strange, but for a moment he almost wished that the understanding black man was his father. He could not help but respect Mula. But could he trust him?

## *Chapter IV*

How rapidly did the months roll by and with each passing day Mula became an ever-important voice at Meral.

Calendar time had little meaning for him, for his time was consumed by the bitter game of producing human life. He grew to love, admire his people, treating them as his father had treated the Ashanti of old; he was the father image for this Georgian tribe.

The afternoon sun slanted through the tall pines as Mula wearily pushed his chair back from the rough desk he'd had built in a corner of the leather shop. The slave records of Meral had always before been left to the brain of Orlando, Mula had instituted a written record, thus becoming a slave to the paper work of his own invention.

Through the wide, barn-like door, which opened onto the slave compound square, he could see Little Sam's shadow as the boy raked up pine needles. He waited for the bullet-headed shadow to materialize into Little Sam himself, then called to him, "Little Sam, fetch me Hugo."

He closed tired eyes, praying it would take the always slow Little Sam longer than usual to find the burly black. A shadow fell across his face, nearly making him curse aloud the lad for being zealous in his duty for the first time.

"Am I disturbing you?" It was a voice he had seldom heard directly since his arrival.



"Not at all, Miss Alina," he answered with careful politeness.

"I . . . we've a problem." Her voice was taut with strain. "Normally, I would take such a matter to Orlando, but he's beside himself with grief. Yorie had another miscarriage last night. Poor dear. She wants children so desperately, and each time they have been denied to her."

"Is that the problem?"

"How I wish it were that simple. I . . ." She pulled her teeth over her lower lip in confusion. "Let me first say that we all owe you our . . . a vote of . . . well . . . our thanks. The sla . . . our people have never been better managed . . . happier."

"Thank you." He looked at her fully for the first time in broad daylight. Her transformation was provocative. Softness had come to her face by the mere handy work of allowing her blond tresses to fall loosely about her shoulders. Sensuously his eyes moved over the fullness of her bosom, unencumbered by flattening straps, and let them flow over the clinging lines of her dress.

"I guess," she stammered, suddenly feeling uncomfortable under his gaze, "there are two matters we should discuss."

"Yes?"

"When we came to Meral we numbered just under two hundred. With purchases and births we are now close to a thousand."

"Thousand twenty-two, to be exact," he consulted a clutter of dusty papers on his desk.

"Twenty-three, if you want to be *really* exact."

"Oh?"

"Lea gave birth an hour ago. That's what I came to discuss with you. The boy is white. Whiter than I am."

"Who knows?"

"Mama Zella, Alvin and myself. Funny, he only shrugged when I told him."

"The arrogant little pup."

"Then you know something. Is the father . . . Alvin?"

"Yes."

"I suspected as much from his attitude. I've got to keep this from father; he'd kill all three of them. Oh, the stupid fool! I should have seen it coming; they've been boon companions since childhood. This may sound strange to you, but Lea has been with us for so long that I never thought of her as black, until I saw the child."

"Black and white do make a startling comparison."

"I really didn't mean to sound bigoted."

"I think I believe you," he said sincerely.

"Thank you. The solution of the first problem leads me, in a way, to the second. There was a post from father in Atlanta this morning. The Lantana Farms of Virginia are prepared to purchase two hundred slaves, in family units, if we can get them to father within two weeks. That means they'd have to leave no later than tomorrow afternoon. Alvin will take them; I've already got him seeing to the outfitting of eight wagons. I want you to prepare a list of two hundred for the sale, we'll include a wet nurse and the child."

"What! Why me? Why not Orlando? I can't send anyone into further slavery."

"Orlando is more sentimental than you."

"And I'm cold and heartless?"

"I've been watching you, Mula. You may be somewhat of a mystery to your own people, but you don't fool me. Month after month you've segregated these people into your own little caste system. I asked questions. I snooped. At first I thought it was little more than your own way of putting everyone back into their own little tribal units. Check me, if I'm wrong, but you've judged which are the weak strains in the lot."

"Lot! That's a damnable word to fasten onto an unsuspecting mass of people."

"What would you suggest?" She seated herself on an old milking stool and motioned for Mula to regain his desk seat. "You know better than any of us that we grow by that many a year. We can't afford to keep them forever."

"Excellent, Miss Alina, but you do the selecting."

Her smile was winning. "I'm the greatest sentimentalist of us all." Then a frown turned her face old and hard again. "I would fight father on this if I didn't know the true financial condition of Meral. It has cost a small fortune to build this plantation. Father has bought, and bought, and bought again; with very few sales, and all of those locally. Another dry summer, another year of having to purchase practically every morsel of food that is consumed by a thousand people and all this will pass."

"Would that be so bad?"

"I don't know. I never doubted what we were doing here until . . ."

When she paused he interrupted her. "I've asked to see Hugo on yet another problem. He's coming across the square now. I think it best that he not see you."

"Where shall I . . ."

"Over behind that saddle rack."

Alina reached the far side of the six-tiered saddle carrier just as Hugo ambled through the open doorway.

"Ya'all wants me?"

"Why else would I send for you?" Mula's voice was petulant, like a little boy's. The double problem Alina placed before him showed in his face.

"Sit down, Hugo," Mula pointed to the stool. "I have something I wish to discuss with you."

Without moving toward the stool, he shifted his lazy frame from one flat foot to the other. "Did ya'all furgit, *massa*, a slave don' sit with de stud-man."

"Goddamnit, sit!"

The heavy framed man caused the stool to disappear beneath his bulk.

"You were eighteen when you came here, Hugo. That was ten years ago. I've been tracing back the line of every child born at Meral . . . never once have I come across the name of an issue that you have sired, and yet you most regularly travel to the mating cabins."

"Well . . . ya'all see . . ."

"You're not much interested in wenching, are you?"

"Same as any othah stud," he shot back hotly.

"Don't lie to me, man. I've had Little Sam in here three times this week crying his eyes out over what you keep forcing him to do against his will. I don't like men who are tempted by pretty boys, and shirk their duty in the mating cabins. You pull a hard on the boy again and I'll personally whip you."

"Ah can leave the youngin alone, 'n ah can do de same as de last ten years, smart boy. Ah pulls de ole pud out an zizzes on der belly. Keep me fu'm doin' dat, if'n you're so damn clebba. 'Sides, ah don' see yore ole black pecker workin' ober time in de cabins. Yah a slave same as me. Da'all wants to bring chill'en into de world who will be bought 'n sold? Dat's jist another life ta be miserable. Ya'all pecker out more fodda fur de autction block, but not wid my seed."

"Is that all you have to say?"

Hugo stared straight ahead, only a slight quiver of his wide nostrils betrayed his rage. "Dey's a day ama comin', massa lov'a, when dis 'ere people am goin' ta sharpen dere knives. Mine am itchin' ta taste yore uppity flesh."

"Would you like to try now?" he said coolly.

"Soon, niggah, mighta soon. We am watchin' yore smart actin' ways. Dey's a bunch of us, a whole bunch. All's peace and harmony, now, but jist yah wait. Any day now, anyday."

"Get out!" Mula snapped the words out so softly, yet so sinisterly, that the black toppled the stool in fleeing.

For a moment he forgot he had another visitor. He looked up guardedly at the sound of her footstep. He quickly grasped the portent of her face. The lines in his face relaxed and he started to smile. "If he, and his kind, stay around you won't have to worry about a dry summer; they'll burn the place out from under you. Which means you win; he'll head the list, and all the others just like him." He laughed. "What's the use of running a stud-farm with people who won't produce?"

"I realize how much I'm asking of you."

"I don't think you do. I find this world little different

than the one I left. Ashanti people are born to slavery; did you know that? Oh, not this type, but similar. We are born chattel to our king, and die still within his service. He, or the *muzkal* elders, also use humans for bartering. The gold coins of Africa, if you will. A tribesman for a head of cattle, a bushel of wheat, a bolt of foreign goods, even for a new wife. I guess this is little different—two hundred lives so that there is food for the remaining eight hundred. I never reached an age in my own land where I was subjected to this same decision.”

“Would you have been a *muz . . . muzkal*?” She stumbled over the strange word.

“Perhaps more. But that was a long ago yesterday. I shall never really know what I might have been among my people.”

“That is not true! Father will give you your manumission.”

“And that’s not true, either. You forget I can read. I’ve been discovering a great deal about your American form of slavery, and it’s not all pretty, but most illuminating. The blacks are far from being your only slaves, Miss Alina. In parts of this land the Irish, Germans, Jews, Italians, Mexicans and many, many more live in a far more degrading enslavement. Human toil to pay off passage debts, family debts, any old debt. But for how long? Ah, there is the wisdom of American business coming to the forefront. You Southerners missed a bet. The Northern business men buy their *slaves*, offering them freedom after so many years of working off the debt. But they never mention that there is interest to be applied to the money owed. Those poor fools will never be free. Who can say which form of slavery is crueler: the one where the black never again hope for freedom, or those poor eggheads who work for a day that will never come?”

“You’re a strange man.”

“Not really. Did you know that we are contemporaries? Yorie told me your age. Funny, how we can be of the same age and are worlds apart. My education helps me no more than your lack of one hinders you. You have

created a world . . . I have lost one. I surrendered everything . . . title, power, a nation I loved . . . so in a sense, Miss Alina, I'm a dead man, and dead men have no further responsibilities for being the progenitor of a race."

"I'm beginning to see what you're talking about," she admitted. "I, too, then am a slave."

"Of what?"

"Of my father. At twenty-two I'm still unwed. In this part of the country that is a sure sign of remaining an old maid for the rest of your life. He will keep me chained to him as surely as he does his other slaves."

"Someday a man will come for you."

"And maybe my father will kill him," she said without emotion.

He looked down at her as she sat beside him, and he thought: perhaps I am that man.

The blue eyes, fixed so urgently upon him, saw his thought. They softened. They filled with tears. She turned aside her head, and he saw her profile, delicate and chill, but inexpressibly shaken.

"Mula," she whispered. The frail muscles of her white throat stood out above the brown dress collar, and trembled.

"Alina," he said. Involuntarily, his hand reached out and seized hers crushingly.

She struggled to regain the steely composure of a white woman sitting with a black. The tears of need were so thick in her eyes that she had to distend her lids to hold them, sternly. She swallowed. After a moment she spoke again, tonelessly: "For a moment I forgot *who* you were."

She did not look at him. Her eyes were fixed on the saddle rack. But she felt the grip on her hand loosen, slacken, fall away. The office corner was pervaded by a deathly coldness.

Then Mula spoke, and his voice seemed to come from a great distance: "Don't you mean *what* I am?"

Then Mula laughed aloud, shortly, with a sound under

the laughter that seemed quite terrible to Alina. She felt its harshness, desolate and infinitely derisive and bitter.

"It is difficult to fathom the white brain. Your men think nothing of strapping on as many black wenches as their stamina will endure, but the white woman must hide her lust behind rigid rules of moralistic clap-trap. Why did you save me if it was not to be seduced?"

The hand stung his face with all her strength of fury.

He looked at her haughtily contemptuous face. The lines of her mouth were hard; the exquisite distended nostrils seemed carved from marble. It was a mouth that needed kissing to softness; a nose that must smell the scent of love.

He caught her in his arms and pressed his mouth hard upon hers. She melted against him. He felt the wild and tumultuous beating of her heart against his chest. A wild rapture swept over him. His large hands pressed her demanding body, hot and seeking, and her firm flesh softened and yielded under them.

They were aware of nothing but their-turbulent coming together, satisfying of their desperate outer hunger.

Then, he felt a power in her, impassive, immovable.

"No," she said, with firmness and calmness.

"I turned black again," he said, his heart plunging.

"It has nothing to do with us. I cannot deny that I find you . . . different . . . interesting." Then striving for her old detachment, and succeeding only in making her voice uneven and breathless, she said: "Meral is a way of life for me. I hated it once. Detested it. It was repugnant to me. It is very difficult for a young woman to grow up without her mother; I always felt that Meral had taken her away from me. And now? I tolerate the plantation. I tolerate the restrictions imposed by its narrow life. I have nothing in common with its slaves." She paused, and now her voice was stern: "Nor do I intend upon becoming their equal."

## *Chapter V*

Alina Frazer found her fierce resolution to blot Mula from her life a difficult one to keep. The first few weeks were not so hard. Every instinct of her pure young womanhood had cried out against the conceit which had imagined her conquest so easy. The memory of his arms about her crushing with cruel force, his hot lips on hers in mad, unasked kisses brought the angry blood mounting to her cheeks. She walked the floor in rage and dropped at last exhausted:

"I could whip him!"

The prurient memory which stung deepest was the terror she had felt in his arms—the sudden fear of the brute quivering in tense muscles and throbbing in passionate kisses. She had thought this black man to be a gentleman. In that flash of self-revelation he was simply a jungle beast. It had unsettled her whole attitude toward life. For the first time she began to fear the darker side of passion. She could not help admire him for his compassion, understanding, knowledge. If this were love, she would have none of it.

Again she resolved for the hundredth time, to banish the last thought of him. If there were no clever, more chivalrous men in the world, she could live without them—white and black.

During the absence of Merritt and Alvin Frazer they were forced into almost daily contact, Alina always



finding an excuse for Orlando or Yorie to be present. She loathed herself for such deceit. Why did she feel drawn to the massive black man? Why-why-why? The very question cut her. She had a sneaking admiration for Alvin because he had dared in loving Lea. There was something perverse in her somewhere, she thought. She could see it now. It must be so or the sensuality in Mula's character would not have drawn her as a magnet from the first. She hadn't a doubt now that all the stories about his merger life and his conquest of European women were true and more than "black folk" gossip had dreamed.

When four weeks passed without a further attempt on Mula's part, the first skirmish between love and pride began. Perhaps she had been unreasonable after all. In her heart of hearts did she desire any other sort of lover? Tears of vexation came in spite of her every effort to maintain her high position. She had to face the plain truth. She didn't desire a cold lover. She wished him to be strong, manly, masterful—yes, masterful, that was it. He ruled the Meral slaves as though it was his God given right. Yet she also wanted him to be infinitely tender. This black man was simply a brute. And yet the memory of his mad embrace and the blind violence of his kisses had become each day more vivid and terrible—terrible because of their fascination. She accepted the fact at last in a burst of bitter tears.

And then the master of Meral returned. It was a different manner of man who came back to Meral. Merritt was jubilant over the princely price he'd received for the slaves. At last, he reasoned, his scheme was showing a profit. He took Mula into his confidence, as he had Orlando of old.

"I've studied your system of propagation most carefully, Mula. The selection of slaves brought a most handsome profit, yet has not hampered Meral in any respect."

"It remains to be seen," was the laconic response. "I wish to talk against no man, Mister Frazer. Your daughter approved the selection I had made. Orlando, without

consulting me or your daughter, issued his own orders. Half of the slaves you sold should never have left this plantation."

"Was something wrong with the group you selected?"

"I felt so, and so did your daughter. Regardless of the women and children involved, we tried to weed out the male element that was becoming surly, unmanageable; those that would be the quickest to stir up a rebellion. In some cases it meant separating people who claimed to have family ties."

"He's becoming an old woman," Merritt growled. "I've told him that his sentimentality doesn't do them a damn bit of good once they reach the auction block. This time we were lucky, the man wanted whole family groups. It may never happen that way ever again."

The giant figure slowly squared his shoulders and faced his opponent, erect, controlled, dignified:

"But the question is, Mister Frazer, who is the better judge of these people, you or I or Orlando? It remains to be seen. In the meantime I must tell you once more that I am not the representative of all these people—I am Ashanti. I hope to say that one day upon my own soil. My duty today is as clear as the noonday sun—to work the five years for my freedom and passage home. I can't lose that at this stage of the game in a fight with your overseer. Those who remain are now unhappy over the manner of the sale; I don't think they would have been with my selection. The rabble-rousers are still amongst us; they will find ways of making the sale look like a black day for all."

"At first I thought they would look upon you as the voice they needed to lead their rebellion; as the Jews did upon Moses."

Mula laughed. "To part the Red Sea is one thing, sir, the Atlantic's another."

Merritt's square jaws came together firmly. Again he saw the havoc of the shipboard storm that had come and gone so suddenly. He was being stupid. No average man

could possess such power. Perhaps he had misjudged this man.

"I am a frank man, Mula. I cannot hide the fact that I am not happy that you are at Meral, but you have given me no reason to mistrust your work. You've been here nearly a year; I'm most curious to know how you'd run this plantation."

Mula's tall, rugged figure met the seated Master with the easy generous attitude of a father ready to expose his son to the facts of life.

"I am satisfied, sir, that you, your overseer and helpers have done the best you could. All accounts say that you have been prosperous. Please, do not interrupt. I know of the cash outlay for foodstuffs. I'm not speaking of monetary prosperity, but human. You can look upon each person on this plantation as a sort of bank account. You buy, or produce them at a given price; add to that the years of feeding and training and come up with a given figure of their worth. Their worth, however, is contingent upon their health and happiness. We have each seen the slave markets. What price do the sickly ones bring? Nothing! And what is the greatest ailment of these people, other than brutal scourging? Sexual sickness. From the Arabs I learned that a constant medical check of the men and women can greatly reduce the deaths from this malady. Shortly after my arrival I found that two of the women, and three men, were infected. Like the Arabs, I fed them large quantities of moldy bread. All five of them are once again able to go to the mating cabins.

"You have here a family—no—a tribe. A tribe little different than if they were all Ashanti or Berger or Bantu or whatever. A tribe is composed of an intricate network of law, order, and command. As it is now there is much confusion—when Orlando is needed in the fields he is in the barns, when he is urgently requested to come to the welping pens, he's planning the harvest. You may be the king, but you have but a single *muzkal*, elder to lead the people. Even in the most primitive tribes of Africa they possess a better plan for this form of communal living.

"You need more *muzkals*! Orlando should see to the planting, growing, harvesting and storage of the fruits of the fields and orchards. Leon is worthy of ruling over the service department: carpenters, blacksmiths, millers. You waste half of Mama Zella's time by keeping her in the kitchen. Besides her duties as mid-wife, give her a dispensary to look after the health of your people. You may regard her ways as black magic, but her manner of healing has been employed by the tribes of Africa for thousands of years.

"Give to each their task of responsibility and they will feel a workable part of the tribe."

After such a lengthy discourse Merritt remained silent for several minutes. His voice held a tingle of excitement as he asked: "And you?"

"Rest assured, sir," the quiet voice responded, "I only wish to go home."

"That didn't answer my question. Here we are, in this office that you have created. I see papers, charts, notes, and all manner of records that you have brought about in ten months time. Are they for your amusement, or are they the real reason for this talk. What shall be your role in this tribe?"

"I will see to the most important product of this plantation—the care and mating of its people."

"How?"

"I have written it all out, if you'd care to trouble yourself with my cramped scrawl."

From a shelf above his desk, Mula took down a leather bound portfolio of papers.

"Its size is impressive," Merritt said, weighing the sheaf in his hand. "Give me a few days and I shall determine if it is as scholarly as bulky. I may just test your theory."

Merritt returned to the main house profoundly puzzled as to his duty in this scheme. He was slightly alarmed at the display of self esteem which his defeated foe had naively made, and Mula's loyalty was boldly and openly questioned in his mind, and yet he was loath to not try the plan. Down in his square, cold heart he felt

that with all his faults of being a black man, Mula was a man of worth, that he had never been thoroughly whipped by life's battles.

That night, as Merritt poured over the masterful plan for producing the finest of human stock, he thought that any other slave owner in his position would have Mula soundly whipped for the insolent and insulting manner in which the present management of Meral was exposed by a scathing diatribe of words. Instead, Merritt was intrigued by his logical, educated work. By morning he was determined to strengthen Meral by the addition of a *muzkal*—council of elders.

Orlando took the announcement of Mula's promotion and his subordination with sullen rage.

"In this thing," he told Yorie, "Merritt is digging his own grave."

And yet against every demand that Mula should be removed from Meral, Merritt was obdurate.

"Mula is playing for power," Orlando insisted.

"All right. Let him," Merritt shouted, stubbornly. "I am perfectly willing that he shall have it if he will only make the Meral slaves the choicest in all Georgia."

But if the owner refused to remove him from power, Orlando and Yorie managed quickly to strip him of his say over the field and house slaves.

Every man and woman who had been a part of Cottonwood and had created and fought the wilderness with such fierce and terrible pride to build Meral, were made to resent this intruder.

Mula himself was furious. He couldn't go directly to Merritt and expose Orlando and Yorie's treachery. His position as a leader would be weakened. By day Orlando held reign over his stud-men as they worked the fields. The cancerous words planted in their minds brought about a sharp decline in pregnancies. Through Yorie's encouragement, and Mula was sure of her actual help, there was a rash of unexplained miscarriages.

The outlook of a coming battle with Orlando seemed ominous.

## *Chapter VI*

Jefferson and the field boss, Jamie, stared into the eternally black, angry eyes of Orlando Diaz, who appeared intense even when drinking his morning chicory.

The houseman hammered home his position. "Boff Massa Albin 'n Missy Alina hab a hiz-tory of sympathy wid us black folk. Massa Frazer he am changed. You tell us, Orlando. He done been in Jacksonville most three weeks. Fur why?"

Orlando played with his newly acquired mustache.

"Business."

"Sellin' bis-iness, ah reckons. He am gonna sell de lot o' us," scowled the field boss. "We was on dat uppitty niggahs otha list, and ah says we'se on it agin."

"Well, Jefferson," Orlando said, "you've had Mula under watch. What do you think?"

"Ah ain' no papah reada, Massa Orlando. He am mighta carefu' to say nothin'. He look at us lak a witch doktor, but don' say nothin'. Ah'm mighta scared ob dat man."

Orlando's eyes seemed blacker. "They're bound to be up to something. He's civil enough to me, but doesn't discuss anything but the weather and time of day. If Merritt Frazer was planning on selling any more slaves this year he would have discussed it with me before he left for Jacksonville."

"How ya'all knows yah ain' part of de sale?"

Orlando slammed his fist onto the kitchen table. "Don't

press me, Jamie. I still don't believe there will be any more sales this year."

"Wat 'bout next year, 'n de next 'n next?" The heavy set field man asked angrily. "Dis 'ere ain' lak Cottonwood. Dis am a pig farm. We grewed cotton there, here we grows babies. Wat I gonna tell de field boys—wurk ya black asses to feed de new studs dat am a comin'? Miss Yorie says dat if'n a black man can git to Canady he am free."

A slight smile crossed the lined face of Orlando.

"But how do you get there?"

"Miss Yorie knows how. Don' yah Miss Yorie?"

Orlando regarded his silent wife. "Well?"

"Merritt seems bent on ruining everything that we've helped him build. What would he have without our labor, our loyalty? I've seen this coming for a long time. It's the same as before, just the same. When he had no further use of my dear, sweet Jeanmarie, he made her simple life so miserable that she couldn't go on living. He's taken the children that I loved and turned them against me, and into selfish little prigs. When was the last time that Alvin or Alina was in this house? You can't remember, can you? And now this Mula. He has Merritt under an evil spell, I tell you."

"Nonsense."

"You listen to me, Orlando Diaz, and you listen good. That man is here to ruin Merritt Frazer and all that he possesses. Unless we are the ones to act we will be ruined right along with everyone else."

"She am right!"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

"You don't owe him another ounce of loyalty, dear husband. Did he call you in and ask your opinion of this outlandish new way of running Meral? No! And more and more you will lose out with Merritt. But don't listen to these idiots. They would kill Mula and feel that life would return to normal. It's not so. Merritt would kill us for touching a single hair of his educated head. There is only one way to hurt them both at the same time. Round

up those that will be loyal to us, burn down Meral, and leave Mula to be blamed by Merritt."

"But people may be killed."

"People are always killed in their quest for freedom, but those who survive benefit."

"What if the victims are Alina and Alvin? They are your . . ."

"Quiet! Your tongue wags too much. What is past, is past. I say we look to the future."

"When shall it be?"

"I'll let you know."

At a quarter past five the next morning there was a timid knock on Mula's cabin door. He was stunned to see Alina waiting with a saddled horse. It was the very first time she had been to his cabin. Obviously, he thought, something was wrong . . . and a sickening wave of fear passed through him . . . they had started the rebellion.

She motioned for him to follow her in silence. All seemed uncommonly normal. From the slave cabins he could hear the sounds of the field hands preparing for their day. Already the milk-maids were crossing the near pasture, wooden buckets and stools in hand. On the main house side of the square the only sound was their feet shuffling on the gravel and the creak of saddle leather.

She drew him out of the circular dirt driveway past the iron gates.

"I've been up all night trying unsuccessfully to reason with Alvin. He's taken Lea away from Meral."

Mula made a gesture of total helplessness.

Alina bit her lip nervously. "I'm not sure, but I think he's taken her to a cabin father had built at one time on the Withlachochee."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Talk to them. Anything. Oh, hell, just find out if they are alright. Alvin left rather high-strung. He was even talking of . . ."

He snatched the reins and moved Alina aside. "Don't tell anyone where I've gone. Tell Mama Zella that you



don't feel good and go to your room. Take one of your father's pistols and lock yourself in. Don't open the door for anyone."

"It sounds foolish, but alright. Just get there in time. At the river turn right and follow it for about five miles. You can't miss the cabin. If you leave now you should be there in . . . in time."

Meral's virgin forests, tilled fields and broad meadows presented prospects so rich and verdant that they reminded Mula of home, but his mind was not on Africa, only this new problem that would meet him at the end of the road.

Mula flung open the door to the cabin. The living room had deteriorated from the days when Merritt had considered building a second plantation. Lea was seated on a high-backed chair. Alvin hulked behind her with a pistol at her head.

"I am subdued by your display of arms," Mula said, "but it is quite unnecessary. I am quite harmless."

"Yah as harmless as a cottonmouth," Alvin sneered.

"As you wish."

"Yes, as ah wish. Ah didn' survive twenta-two years outta stupidity. Wa'all, wat da hell da yah want?"

"Of course you must know why I am here."

"No games, niggah. Too early in da mornin' fur games."

"Is it a game to contemplate the taking of two lives?"

"Who in de hell said anythin' bout killin'?"

"Your actions."

He giggled his strange boyish giggle, then lifted the pistol to Mula's heart level and laughed.

"Or ta protect my family frum intruders?"

"Family?"

"Damn right, slaver. Yah 'n my chicken-livered sista done thought ya was right smart in sellin' my baby boy. Wa'all ah out foxed ya, niggah. Ah'm the buyer, see. 'N dat am his wet-nurse. Ah bought her, too."

Mula had not seen her sitting in a dark corner. The skinny colored girl unfolded her legs and stood, pulling

the contented, nursing child from a swollen breast. Wordlessly, she went away to a bedroom.

Even in this tense atmosphere, the dark unkempt house, the devouring pine woods, even so he was aware of the insurmountable problem.

"You intend on setting up house here, so close to the reach of your father?"

"Ya're too damned logical fur a niggah."

"In any event it's dangerous."

"Now wat's it ta yah?"

"There's talk of rebellion, mass desertion. When they find that Lea's gone it might open the flood gate." He turned to the frightened girl. "Didn't you tell Debbie that you weren't worried about trouble. That at the first sign of anything happening Master Alvin would take you away to safety?"

"She am an uppity house gal, she am. I says it to her to puts her right back in her place. Truth, now, dat's why I says it to her."

"And she's told everyone at Meral. Most have laughed, but not the ones who are planning this dangerous ploy. They'll see Lea gone and think you've run scared."

"As if ah cared," Alvin tried hard to sound bored.

"But I do," Mula snapped. "There'd be mass blood letting. Every poor white, slaver and hound would turn this country into a mass hunt. They'd shoot before they asked questions, just to keep the fever of freedom from infecting their slaves. In a hundred mile radius there are over forty thousand slaves, less than five hundred whites. Meral could start something that would make the gathering of slaves in Africa look like a picnic. I think more of the people of Meral than to see them go to a needless slaughter."

"And ah'm to gib up my chile because of the Meral niggah people? Yah askin' me ta do wat my pappy did to yah? Shall I send my baby boy inta slavery?"

Mula flushed. Currents of despair and confusion ran together within him.

"No," he finally answered. "I can't ask that of you."

"Wat den?"

"I don't know. Let me think." Even as his mind raced he was aware of the female opposite him. Her body was closely hugged by the simple dress, the buttocks showing round yet firm. Mula's eyes played on her slender boyish body and how enticing it could be. It was clear that Alvin had gone very far with this woman. It was stupid for him to get involved, but to gain grace with Alina he must do something.

"Who knows you returned from Jacksonville last night?"

"No one. It was late when ah returned. I left the wagon down the road bout a mile. Lea's been stayin' in the main house while ah was away, so wasn't to hard ta get her awake. We'd a gotten away if Alina hadn't heard us packin' up food stuff in de kitchen."

"Good. I want you to get back to the plantation before I get there. I want it to appear like you've just returned from Jacksonville. Talk to everybody that you see. I'll wait until the sun is high in the sky. I want everyone in the fields to see me come riding by. Are there enough foodstuffs here for a couple of days?"

"Sur-ah."

"Then the woman and child will be alright."

"Wat about Lea?"

"Lea must die," Mula said evenly.

"Git out!" Alvin screamed. "Git de shit outta 'ere fore ah blows yah fuckin' brains agin dat wall!"

"Shut up!" Mula commanded, his voice harsh, ugly, shrill. Calmly he outlined his plan.

An hour later, Alvin's face was wet with perspiration as the men secured the blood stained canvas bag to the back of the saddle horse. Large rings of sweat circled down beneath the armpits of Mula's shirt.

Mula watched a desperation seize Alvin. He had never seen such fear in a man's face.

"Will it wurk?" he cried. "Will it save my baby?"

"I hope so. Now, you'd best get on your horse and shag-ass out of here. Time is running against us."

"Ah . . . say . . . ah never done this 'fore, he-air. But ah'd be mighty proud to shake yore hand."

Mula controlled himself until Alvin was but a dust cloud, then he laughed. Laughed like he had never laughed in years. Alvin Frazer could bed-wench with a colored gal for years, seed her up with child, fight like a cornered pole-cat to keep the brat alive, then feel embarrassed over shaking hands with a black man.

Mula chuckled until the fields of Meral came in view, then the mask of tragedy dropped back over his handsome face. Lea had been popular; she'd be missed on the plantation. As he rode slowly past the fields, his cargo became a matter of deep concern to the guarded, but watching eyes of the field hands.

## *Chapter VII*

The hysterical screaming act, performed by a forewarned Alina, was most effective. Sobbing in mock grief, she directed that the canvas bag be taken to her room; for Leon to prepare a pine burying box. Alone, she would prepare the grizzly bear-mauled body for burial. She let it be known that she felt responsible because she had sent the girl through the woods to intercept Alvin at the county road. When neither appeared, she'd become frightened for Lea's safety, sending Mula to seek out the girl.

If there were those who doubted the death of Lea, no one spoke up. That the simple casket remained closed was not questioned; one look at the terror in Alina's face told of the horror of the girl's death.

The evening of her funeral two bucks were missing for the cabin schedule. The hounds had them cornered before dawn.

Mula was worried more than ever as he brought the two deserters back to the plantation. The knowledge that these two were not part of the rebel group hadn't done anything to lift his spirits.

He let himself in the front door of the main house. It was quiet. Merritt had not returned, Alvin was with the supposedly dead Lea, Alina was alone. He tiptoed up the curving stairs and pushed her bedroom door open just enough to see that she was safe and asleep. She was on her back with one arm curled above her head and the

other stretched out, the hand hanging off the bed. She looked peaceful enough, perhaps even dreaming. Mula watched her and for a moment his burden seemed lighter.

How often had he dreamed of finding her thus: young, beautiful, sleeping with that curled arm above her head and the other stretched out, hand off the bed as if imploring him to join her. In his dream he would undress quietly and slide in next to her, nudging her gently to make room for himself. She would move, but the second he was settled, she would move back and snuggle up to him preparatory to waking. Too much dreaming could be dangerous.

Through the cotton sheet, he could see the imprint of her richly endowed body, and he longed to see her nude. He hadn't been with a woman in a long time. In fact, he had been able to keep himself away from the mating cabins on her account. He turned to leave, but she stopped him.

"Mula," he heard her say. He turned around. She was sitting up, holding her bent knees. "Did you find them?"

"Yes. I didn't mean to wake you," he said, trying to conceal his feelings.

"That's all right, it's time to get up anyway." She stretched and the thin sheet she was using for a breast shield fell away. She pulled it back up, but not before Mula saw those full, ripe mounds, with those tender, pink tips. His pulse quickened and his mouth went dry. He felt he would go mad if he did not possess her. She glanced over at the mantle clock.

"Did Merritt return last night?"

"No," he blurted. "No. And it was foolish for Alvin to stay away."

"Something's wrong, Mula. I can hear it in your voice. What is it?"

He wasn't sure what was more wrong, the trouble on the plantation or his feelings toward her. For the first time in his adult life, Mula was thoroughly confused.

"I'm . . ." he sighed heavily. ". . . I'm worried about you."

"About me?" She laughed and threw a strand of hair back out of her face. "Why?"

"Well . . . I'm worried about your being the only white woman on Meral."

"I've always been."

"There's never been this type of trouble before. These people are being mentally torn apart in a test of loyalties. It can't go on much longer before it becomes an open, ugly wound."

This was the fifth time they had been totally alone. Mula didn't really mind the fear surrounding Alina's womanhood. He understood her old maidish reluctance. She wasn't the sort that could be pushed. He could only like her, be with her and hope that at one such meeting she might fall to his sensual level. Thus far, he had tasted of only a kiss. Sweet, inexperienced, but a kiss that had been sincere and warm.

"You worry about me, and I worry about you." The statement took him a little by surprise. He noticed that she was troubled about something.

"What worries you most?"

Her face grew grave and her eyes looked far away.

"Who is the good-looking young fellow in the stud section? I think he's part of the new group father sent back from Jacksonville."

"Amos? With a heavy voice, a little lighter than I am?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"He's off the Landum plantation in New Orleans. Why?"

"Promise you won't say or do anything about what I tell you. It would only cause more problems between you and Orlando."

"Well . . ."

"Promise."

"All right."

"While you were gone last night he came to the house."

He claims to be a friend of Yorie's from New Orleans. He must think me stupid; he's hardly old enough to have known her before she came to Cottonwood. He claims to be a spokesman for the stud section. He was insolent and rude and demanded that I speak to father and insist upon your being sold off Meral. If I didn't they would. . . . the only way I could get rid of him was to promise that I would speak to father."

"Perhaps you should." His fear for her safety was genuine.

"Don't be idiotic! One hint of trouble and any threat against my life and father will turn this into an armed camp. I . . . I like you so much, Mula, yet I'm afraid. Maybe of you, probably of myself, but mainly for what this is doing to Meral. I'm not a child, but there are some things I haven't come up against. This feeling I have for you is one of them and it's a little frightening. I want you to go away and fear that you will. I want to be near you and I want to run away from you. I dream of you and try to forget my dreams. I never felt the void in my life until you came along. I want you . . . to kiss away that void."

This time the kiss turned his dream into reality. Alina accepted the soothing comfort of strong male arms without reservation. She closed her eyes and ears to the sights and sounds of trouble, nestling close to his chest. Arms that had longed to hold her passionate body now encircled her protectively. She shuddered and crept closer to the reassuring strength of masculinity until her trembling spoke of a new fear.

In a tremulant dream of tenderness, she tasted love, then feverish hunger, then uncontrolled abandon. Alina stiffened at first under his manly assault, then turned the union into a frantic passionate meshing of bodies.

Alina didn't get out of bed right away. She lay on her back, staring at the rough beamed ceiling and reproaching herself for having weakened to the demands of her flesh. It would be the first and last time, she reasoned. An experience, nothing more.



She got out of bed and dressed hurriedly. She wanted life to go on as usual. She needed love and needed it badly, but there was something about Mula that frightened her. To accept his love openly would mean to lose everything.

For no apparent reason she ordered Elva to prepare an enormous breakfast. Bacon and eggs, wheatcakes, hot biscuits, red-eye gravy, and wild strawberry jam.

Coming into the dining room she was surprised to find Alvin slurping a cup of steaming coffee.

"Hi-ya!" he said gaily.

"I was wondering if you'd get back before father."

"Gotta keep you respectable."

She sat down wearily at her place; the dizzy glow of having just experienced love evaporating in comparison with her twin brother's black union.

"Alvin," she sighed heavily, "do you love the girl, or are you just protecting the child?"

"Does it really matter, ta you?"

"You're my brother," she shrieked. "Of course it matters to me."

"Aw, sis, ya'all can't understand."

"I can understand that you talk and act more like a Negro everyday."

"I like t'talk like Lea. Sump'n wrong wid dat?" he said coolly.

"Oh, of course not," she sneered. "But how long can his charade continue?"

"As long as she'll have me," he grinned.

"Do you love her?" The question was filled with a dual kind of wondering.

"Ah reckon as such. Ah'm used to her."

"Oh, God, Alvie, how could you do this?"

"B'cause she cares," he stormed. "Wat am ah round 'ere? Nothin' t' nobody! Lea's always been 'ere t'look after me. She's human, Allie. She see's mah heart, 'n who see's yores? Did ah ax't why you'd all a sudden 'came pretty 'gain? No! Did ah ax't why you'd all a sudden returned to th' human race? No! Don' you think ah can see,

hear, think. Ah see'd yah lookin' at dat stud-man. Yah righteous people make me sick. It's all right f'ya to moon over dat black cock, but jist let me stick a black pussy 'n yore all condem'in'."

"I'm . . ."

"Ah don' wanta talk no more. Ah'm goin' t'wash up fur breakfast."

"No, Alvie, wait! I must talk with someone."

"Wait an' talk wid father."

"Oh, don't be an imp." She leaned against the door jamb. Then, she whispered: "Tell me what I'm to do. I think I'm going crazy-mad."

"Why not, we all are. The Mad Frazer Family of Meral. Didn't you know that? We're the talk of half the county. Old Man Frazer and his strange brats. He won't let them screw around with the white kids of the county." He was so enraged that he dropped his negroid mannerism of speech. "Do you know what happened to me at the country dance two months ago; that'll show you how far the gossip has gone. Some stud comes up next to me out in the out-house. 'Hear'd tell,' he leered at me, 'that ya'all swallows de meat, Frazer boy. Ah's got me a mighty hot chunk of it fur sucking.' I beat the shit out of him."

"Stop it!"

"I'm sorry, Allie. I apologize for what I just said."

Alina said quietly: "May I ask you a very personal question?"

"Yes, of course."

"When you make love to her is she still black, or does she . . . is she . . . well, just a part of you?"

"I don't quite know what you mean."

"Why not be frank about it. You think father is to blame for keeping us here, single and unwed—and, of course, he is. But you also thought—or at least the thought crossed your mind, didn't it—that he was *deliberately* doing all that?"

"I . . . I don't know that I ever . . . actually . . . or if I did it was . . ."

"All right, have it the way you want. You feel comfortable with Lea? Why? I feel comfortable with Mula. Why?"

"But I still don't see . . ."

"When Grandpa Dunoyer was dying he told me to 'always look out after Yorie; she'd always be a part of us.' I didn't think anything of it at the time. Only recently has the phrase gone round and round in my mind. If my brain has a temperature, these thoughts have turned it to fever heat."

"What are you trying to say?"

"We are drawn to these people because we are part of them."

"Are you sayin' we're niggah?"

"I don't know. I think we must have some of their blood running through our bodies. Why else would father keep us divorced from the white world?"

"Or is this just a weak excuse to appease your mind for loving that black boy?"

Alina said heavily, after a pause: "Yes, I guess it is. I'm sorry I wasn't frank. I've known since he came here that he was different from any man I'd ever met. Not just his color; I'm used to seeing handsome black studs. He makes me feel like a woman, a real woman; one who's wanted and desired. Is there anything one can do?"

"Sell him off Meral."

"Shall I include Lea in the same sale?"

"That's different. To go to bed for sensual pleasure is to be an animal—to go to bed to make love is love."

"What if that is the kind of love I want from him?"

"I don't think you'd care for his kind of love."

"Oh, but I might . . . you never can tell."

"Then why ask my advice?" He turned to his sister tentatively. "I don't know if Mula mentioned it, but he's given me rather wise counsel. I think I even admire him."

"Admire?" echoed Alina.

"He stands up to father in a way that we never could."

"Would you stand up to father for me, if I took up with Mula?"

"I can't even stand up to him over Lea, although I will have to some day." Then he added, establishing a small line of resistance: "I wish this had never happened to either of us."

"But it has." Alina stopped pacing and put an arm on Alvin's shoulder. She became human and the humanity rekindled their twinship. "But I still have the power to put a stop to my heart-break, before it goes as far as yours."

## *Chapter VIII*

Merritt did not return that day, or the next. That there were no further attempts at desertion left Mula uneasy, wary. He stalked the plantation at night, ancient memories stirring him to the scent of danger.

The air was sweet with the perfume of spring blossoms. Somewhere in the compound a slave was playing the banjo and far down the river, beside their little cottage, Alvin and Lea sat watching the moon fling its sparkling veil over the rippling water.

From the verandah Alina watched the pacing giant with curious tenderness, and wondered if she had known her own heart after all—wondered if the fierce blinding passion she had felt for the moment had been the divine thing that links the soul to the eternal? A strange spiritual beauty enveloped her and drew her toward the black man. There was something restful in his mystery. She wondered vaguely if it were possible to love a black man as one would a white man. Why had his powerful, brutal personality drawn her with such terrible power? Was such a force true love or sexual craving?

Wordlessly he came to her, took her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers. The touch of his lips sent a thrill through her heart.

"Alina," he said softly.

"Yes."

"Haven't you realized yet that you are going to be mine?"

"Not in the way you mean . . ."

"But you are, dearest, you are!" he whispered rapturously. "You love me. You just haven't really faced the thing yet and put it to the test in your heart. Our color has separated us, that's all. But there's never been a moment's doubt in my soul since I looked into your eyes that night I was on the chaining pole. And when you kissed me . . ."

"You know why I did that, Mula," she murmured.

"You're fooling yourself, Alina! Say you'll be mine."

"But I don't love you, Mula, as you love me . . ."

"I don't ask it now. I can wait. Promise me . . . promise me!"

As the moon moved a quarter way across the sky he poured into her ears his passionate tender plea, until the rapture of his love, the perfumed air of the Spring night, stole into her lonely heart with resistless charm.

She lifted her lips to his at last and whispered: "Yes. Yes, I love you! Now, goodnight, before I invite you to my room again."

Mula was triumphant. His battle was near won. So absorbed was he in speculation that he paid scant attention to a group of slaves strolling aimlessly about in the compound. His mind was quickly returned to reality by a gigantic roar. A wooden shed full of baled cotton, fruit crates, and he knew not what else, burst into a blaze so suddenly that he thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume their labors. No one seemed to be in a hurry to extinguish the flames.

It had been hopeless from the very first. The flames had leaped high, driven everybody back, lighted up everything—and collapsed. By the time Mula arrived, the shed was already a heap of embers glowing fiercely. As he approached the glow from the dark, he found himself behind men who were talking. He heard the name of Orlando pronounced, then the words, "tak 'vantage of de massa not being back." One of the men was Jamie, the field boss. Mula wished him a good evening.

"Ain' nothin' good bout it," he said, and walked off.

The other man remained. He was the new stud, Amos. Young, aggressive, a bit too light skinned, with a forked little beard and a hook to his nose. He was stand-offish with the other bucks, and they on their side said he was Orlando's spy. As for Mula, he had hardly ever spoken to him before. They started talking and, by and by, strolled away from the hissing ruins.

With each mention of Orlando, Amos would twist his answers. It was evident Amos was a perfectly shameless prevaricator. At last he got angry, and to conceal a movement of furious annoyance, he yawned and then suddenly turned away without wishing Mula goodnight.

Strange! It took all his inborn strength to fight back the primitive superstition that he'd been kept talking for a devious reason.

In the clearing he looked down the rows of cabins, and felt annoyed to see that they all appeared deserted. Cutting across the peach orchard he checked on the back of the main house. He was amazed. Then he had to look at the front mighty quick, because upwards of twenty blacks were forming a circle about the entranceway.

He strode forward. Sticks, little home-made sticks began flying about—thick: they were whizzing before his nose, dropping below him, striking behind him against the trees. All this time the slave quarters, the main house, the woods, the gardens were very quiet—perfectly quiet. He could only hear the heavy thump of the carelessly aimed arrows. Had it not been so dangerous he might have seen the comic aspect of the natives retaining their ability to make such weapons, but having lost all their training to put them to effective use.

He had to dash quickly into the mulberry bushes. He saw a face amongst the leaves on the level with his own, looking at him very fierce and steady; and then suddenly, as though a veil had been removed from his eyes, he made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked chests, arms, legs, glaring eyes—the garden was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of a midnight color. He had been purposely lured away from Alina so that they

could move against the main house and gain access to Merritt's store of fire-arms.

The twigs shook, swayed, and rustled, the arrows flew out of them glancing foolishly off the heavy timbered house.

Mula backed away. He held his head rigid, face forward; but his raging eyes rolled with sheer anger, he kept on, lifting and setting down his feet gently. There was only one way to stop this madness.

The man and woman sat in their clean little cottage as though their whole world was as normal as usual.

Mula paced back and forth excitedly as he talked. For five minutes, he did not pause, and the other man, sitting on the camp stool in a corner of the kitchen, followed him with eyes much as a lonely lion-tamer, shut in a cage with his uncertain charge, keeps his gaze bent on the animal. As he listened, Orlando's expression ran a gamut from astonishment, through sympathy, and into final distrust. At last, Mula ended with:

"And so, you've got to get them away from the main house."

Orlando looked up sternly, and his sharp features were decisively set. "Suppose I should get them back," he began swiftly. "Suppose it were possible to get them away from the house, what reason have I to trust you?"

"To hell with trust. You've got to do it because you have a friend in that house. Have you no thought for Miss Alina?"

Orlando came to his feet with an excited gesture of anger.

"You know that when they smell the first hint of escape they will slaughter any man who stands in their way." His tone rose to a climax of vehemence: "And you ask me to stand up to them!"

"You know they trust you," began Mula, conscious of the feeble nature of his argument. "You know their plans, their strength. Is it all of them, or only a small part?"

"I warned them not to tell me," he lied. "Maybe I was



a damned fool, and maybe you were pretty slick, playing up to Merritt," retorted Orlando, hotly. "How am I to know that you only wish to save Alina and not put down the entire demonstration?"

"Demonstration! My god, man, that's a full scale rebellion that's brewing."

"Hardly. Only a means to scare Alina into getting rid of you."

"Bullshit! You can't put me off with your bloody double talk. Are you going to get Alina out of there?"

"No, Mula, I can't help you, or Alina."

Mula stood stupefied and rigid. Every moment wasted in argument imperiled more deeply the girl he must save. Yet, he could do nothing except with Orlando's assistance. The only chance lay in convincing him, and that must be done at any cost. This was no time for selecting methods.

"I don't give a bloody damn if they all leave the plantation," he contended, desperately. "They will save her without asking the reason. You have only to see them. You have my life in your hands; I'll go with you. You can kill me at the first false move. You can . . ."

"You can just shut up!" Orlando interrupted with fierce bluntness. "I can do better than that, and you damn well know it. My word on this plantation goes the same as if I were the master. I can say to Merritt that you assaulted me, and it will be my testimony against yours. I can have you put into irons, and thrown in the pit."

"Do it then," Mula cried in desperation, "but save Alina."

"I could also," he answered coldly, "blame the entire uprising and her murder upon you. I'm sure that Merritt would not find that hard to believe."

"Can you let this happen?" Mula snapped at the silent Yorie. "Can you sit and listen to your husband plan the murder of the child you helped raise from an infant? Does she mean so little to you?"

Yorie looked around the room in bewilderment.

"Why of course not. Everybody knows that Miss Alina

is their friend. Tell him, Orlando, that no harm will come to her, as long as she only follows instructions," Yorie said.

Orlando did not answer.

Mula felt helpless but suddenly a wave of his old assurance came over him.

"He can't answer you, Yorie, for the leaders of this rebellion are not true Cottonwood or Meral slaves. They are the late-comers, the slaves from other plantations who do not know of her tenderness or love for them. To spite me, Orlando has played right into their hands. To them Alina is just another white woman who stands in their way for freedom."

"You are wrong, black man. Orlando said that no harm would come to her if she did as told, and I believe what my husband said."

"Can you still make that statement?" Mula demanded, harshly.

"I said I would do her no harm, but I am not out upon the square."

She stared at him in mock disbelief. Orlando had laid his plans well and it seemed that providence was on his side, because the appearance of Mula was something upon which he could not have counted, but had been of inestimable help to him. He could sit quietly in his cabin and let the battle rage, quelling the riot only when he had regained control of Meral. The longer he could keep Mula from the people, the sooner his plan would succeed.

The silence was broken by the sharp rattle of rifle fire.

"Good god!" breathed Yorie. "What does that mean?"

The two men ran into the narrow street, and the air began to grow heavy with the noise of volleys, and yet the main house was silent.

Orlando ran apathetically forward. Something had gone amiss! His dreams were crumbling at the moment of success. At the next corner, they drew to one side. A dozen horsemen swept by on the double-quick. They had been in action and riding hard. Their faces streamed with sweat. Mula recognized Alvin Frazer and shouted

desperately, but the young man shook his head wildly, and went on toward the main square.

The brilliant moon came from its cold cover and flooded the field of blood and death with an eerie glory. From every nook and corner, from every shadow and across every open space, through the hot breath of the night, came the overpowering moans of the wounded, and the continued rifle reports.

A black shadow lurched at them from the under brush. Mula tackled the charger as Orlando ran back to the protective cover of his cottage. Pinning the weaponless big man to the ground took little effort on Mula's part. He wrestled the curly head to one side and peered into a wide face sporting a broad devilish grin.

"Big Sam!"

"Yassah, dat's me, Big Sam."

"You're not one of them?"

"Na, suh! Dey volunteered me, suh."

"Volunteered you, did they?" Mula laughed.

"Yassah—dat dey did. Dey sho' volunteered ole Big Sam. But ah don' outfoxed dem, Yassah!"

"What do you mean?"

"Dey spreads de wurd at suppa time dat de signal would be de burnin' of de cotton shed. Ah looks ebrywhere for yah, Massa Mula, but ah don't find yah, and ah gits scared dat dey done done yah in. So ah says ta Jamie dat ah ain' goin' 'gainst Massa Merritt. He come to my cabin and kicked de shit outta ole Big Sam. He says ah gotta meet him by de cotton shed, and ah knows ah better or ah's a dead man. So, when he leaves, ah tells my little Sammy ta shag-ass down riber to de cabin where Massa Albin am a stayin' wid li'l Lea."

"How'd you know about Lea?"

"Ah didn't, Massa Mula. My woman, Mama Zella, done seen it in de taro cards dat she ain' dead. She burn de bones ob a chicken and seen four souls livin' by water. Dese only one place lak dat round here. 'N my Mama Zella she tells de child ta tell Massa Albin ta row ober de

riber ta the Fennell side and he'll find a posse of Fennell men a'lookin' fur a runaway."

"How in the hell did she know that?"

"Well . . . ah . . . yah sees . . ."

"Is she harboring the runaway?"

"If dat means is she nursing de poor sick critter back ta health, yes. Dey is mighta mean folk, dem Fennells."

"That's what I was afraid of, Big Sam. They've come at a good time, but I think we're going to have to act fast before they get it in their heads that this is an open season for manslaughter. Get back to Mama and have her tell all those who are loyal to stay within their cabins."

"Yassah!"

Into the main house square where the frenzy of combat had blazed up with such a sudden spurt and burned itself out so quickly, Mula had walked around the angle of the cook house, just in time to find himself precipitated into one of the fiercest incidents of the bloody night.

Jamie and Amos, with twenty blacks, had not surrendered. From somewhere they had obtained fire powder. Alvin had counted on launching a surprise blow, paralyzing the weaponless slaves, and had instead encountered partial preparedness. Four wagons had been rolled to the front of the house, tossed onto their sides and formed into a fortress barricade.

The wide square remained quiet, Alvin's horsemen waited in the shadow of the trees to ascertain the rebels fire power. An occasional balcony window would open cautiously, and an occasional black rebel head would be thrust out to look up and down the length of the driveway. An occasional shape on the gravel drive would moan painfully, and shift its position with the return of consciousness, or grow more grotesque in the stiffness of death as the hours wore into dawn, and one sight froze Mula's heart in terror; the great iron-studded main door stood ajar, hanging precariously by a single hinge. The rebels had the main house, Alina and Merritt's arsenal.

It became a waiting game, with only an occasional

sniper firing at a moving shadow. As the firing had subsided, some of the bolder slaves ventured forth in search for such acquaintances and kin as had been caught in the compound and square between the impact of forces in the unwarned battle.

Among them was Mama Zella, who followed up the path she fancied Mula must have taken. She was haggard and distraught.

The old woman's search became feverish. There was little time to lose. Unafraid, she walked directly into the square.

"Git back, old woman," Amos screamed at her, while at the same time one of Fennell's men barked: "Shoot 'er! She's carryin' more ammunition to them."

"Hold your fire!" Alvin yelled. "It's Mama Zella! Mama! Mama Zella! Get out of the line of fire."

"Na, sah, Massa Albin. Dey ain' gonna pop off at dis ole gal. Ah don' see my death in de taro cards, although ah sees many others dat make dis ole heart already sad. If'n yah want dis blood shed stopped ah wants yah all ta listen to ole Mama Zella. Mula!" she called. "Where am yah, boy?"

"I am here, Mama."

"Come 'er so as ah can see yah, boy."

"Don't do it," one of the Fennell gun-men warned. "It's a trap."

It did seem strange to Mula, but why would she lead him into a trap? She had already reached the center of the square when a movement caught his gaze at one of the upper story windows. With their backs to the main house, the rebels did not see Alina push open her window. Thank God, she's alive, he breathed, as his feet started out upon the crushed gravel.

A few seconds later, the night deathly still, he stood towering over the woman.

"Ah ain' gwine ta let dem shoot yah. You'se too vallable a nigger fer dat," she said softly for his ears alone; then she raised her voice in a ringing shout: "Listen t'me, all ob yah, dis am Mama Zella talkin'. In our

land ah was de woman t'a Fanti warrior. When we was sold inta slavery, jist as we had sold de Ashanti inta slavery, my man gives me dis 'ere package. He says dat dis 'ere bundle someday would save de libes of many people; it's pow'fu ju-ju magic. He says dat someday a man will come t'claim de bundle frum me. Ah din' believe it myself till dey brung dis 'ere black man t' Meral. Den de bundle shake, 'n rumble, 'n dance, 'n talk ta Mama Zella. It gibes Mama Zella a name, 'n dat name scared ole Mama 'bout ta death. Only one such body could have such power."

Mama Zella paused and put the bundle upon the ground. The leaf-cloth was old and stained, the knotted hemp rope almost impossible to unsnarl.

Mula fixed her working fingers with a fierce stare. Silence surrounded them like a funeral dirge.

At the moment the cloth came away the moon danced again from its cloud cover. She rose, holding the object aloft with trembling reverence.

"*U'masi, U'masi, Prempeh*. Spirit of de Ashanti return! Give ta me de name of de one who stands before me."

His throat clenched with emotion, Mula took the Golden Stool of the Ashanti from the wrinkled old hands.

"*U'masi, U'masi, Prempeh*," she intoned in a guttural sing-song. Even the night birds and crickets ceased their chirping. The moon caught the soft glow of the gold and seemed to illuminate Mula's handsome face.

A bolt of heat lightening crackled across the heavens and as the answering thunder boomed she cried out: "*Nkumula Prempehumasi!*"

"*Tubishi*, the god-king," a voice sang out of the crowd. An audible murmur spread throughout the slaves, regardless of their original tribal heritage. There was a king among them.

Amos threw up both hands with a gesture of rage. He knew what the wiley old woman was up to.

"Don' listen ta dat ole hag!" he growled. "It's a trick!"

Mula faced him a moment and the two men looked at each other tense, erect, unyielding.

"There may or may not be a grain of truth in the tale that to kill the holder of the Golden Stool means a thousand deaths," Mula said in a quiet voice, "but then you are not Ashanti, Amos. Most of the men who follow you are, or have some blood of the Ashanti. Their faith may be deeper. Listen to me, men of the Ashanti. I am as she says, Nkumula Prempehumasi—one who lives free as the son of our king. If you doubt, let me say to you that I was born to Nembula, seventh wife of Prempeh, who before me had raised from his loins only eleven daughters. If you still doubt let me add that I was given birth during the seventh moon of the *Zur*, and the *muzkal* Kurlon predicted that I would be a woman child and therefore he should be proclaimed Prempeh.

"Hear me, oh ye Ashanti warriors, for with the Golden Stool I am Prempeh, king of the Ashanti. This is a time when the people have need of a king and as king I say that there shall be no further bloodshed!"

Mula strode to the barricade in silence and paused.

"Lay down your arms," he commanded.

In vain Amos and Jamie stormed and threatened. Mula was adamant. One by one the ranks were dwindled to but the two men.

"Thell with the slavers and dere black king," Amos screamed raising a rifle at Mula's heart.

A single shot rang out. Amos looked stunned. His wide eyes flared. He dropped the rifle to claw at his back before falling lifeless at Mula's feet. From the balcony Alina gasped, then let her smoking pistol clatter to the driveway.

With a single mighty impulse, the slaves surged toward the wagons, and over them. The mob fell on Jamie and Amos like hungry wolves. In seconds the two blacks were only broken heaps of blood and bone trampled into the driveway.

From the back of his throat, from a long dead jungle

heritage, Mula cried out an Ashanti command. The slaves were overawed and the ranks fell back, melting into the early morning shadows; removing the wounded as they left.

Silently the Fennell horsemen rode away, stupefied by what they had witnessed.



## Chapter IX

By first morning light the rubble had been removed, leaving Meral peaceful, tranquil.

Alina sat alone, lonely. Her breakfast cooled without being touched. Yesterday Mula had been a mere black man; today he was something different. Something that even put her in awe of him. Now, she thought, she would never be able to openly acknowledge her heart. She suddenly had a premonition that sometime, in the very near future perhaps, something *would* be done about her love. As she thought the word, something strange happened to Alina, she understood Alvin's love for Lea.

The squeak of wagon wheels on the hard gravel brought her to her senses. She shook her head in dismay. Merritt was home, but he was not alone. Beside her father in the wagon sat Lea, behind them, nestling the baby protectively to her bosom, sat the colored wet-nurse. It was far too late to arouse the sleeping Alvin, to warn Mula, or hustle the trio into the house before they were seen by the other slaves.

She bumped into her father in the front hall. He paid scant attention to the main door hanging loosely by a single hinge.

She said uncertainly, "Good morning?"

His eyes were stone gray and dark and they burned at Alina with a restless, resentful fire that almost made her catch her breath. This man was her father, yet she'd

never seen him before. The grim, taciturn giant spoke to no one. He entered the dining room and sat and ate silently, his eyes on his plate. When he had finished, he mopped his plate with a whole biscuit and stuffed it into his mouth. Alina cleared her throat, then said a little stiffly, "They almost killed me last night."

He pushed his chair back, crossed to the door and turned. "Your brother's home?" The curttness of his tone had a way of making everything he said sound like a command.

"In his room."

"Send someone for that black bastard, Mula, then you bring me your goddam nigger-fuckin' brother."

Alina looked at him with large solemn eyes. After a second, she said, "There's the child to consider."

He said abruptly. "Screw the bastard! They're not married and never will be. I don't want some half-black someday trying to claim Meral."

She crossed the room and took his hand. "There's nobody could do that, father. But we do need Alvin, now. We came near to losing everything last night. He's set on keeping the child, so don't be too harsh. We must stick together."

Merritt frowned and looked out through the window to where Lea was a frightening ghost returned from the grave. None dared approach her, but stood, in an ever increasing circle, to stare and jabber.

Mula did not need to be summoned. He came bounding out of the crowd like a wild, charging bull.

"Leave us alone," Merritt commanded.

They glowered at each other across centuries of suspicion: Merritt sure, capable and white with the hard, uninhibited eye of the master; Mula disadvantaged but not cowering, drawn into the eye of the hurricane, picking his way cautiously.

"I came back by way of the north road. Orlando met me ten miles out. Know what I found at the ole cabin?"

"Perhaps I should ask Orlando."

"Or tell me what the goddamn hell has been going on around here."

"Orlando could answer that best."

"Orlando, Orlando, Orlando! You listen to me, black man. I was speakin' t'you and I sure as damn hell expect some answers or your black hide will feel the raw-hide."

"While your whole empire crumbles?"

"It's mine to let crumble."

"Is it? Do you know what's been going on around here? Do you really care? I'm the outsider. You didn't want me, but you've got to have me now. Mine was to be a stud-man's job in exchange for my freedom. I said I'd do my best. But before I'd even begun, your overseer turned it into a damn popularity contest. I don't aim to be popular, just free. Because of his vain jealousy we faced a mass rebellion here last night, in case you're at all interested."

"That can wait! What interests me at the present is that girl and child sitting on my wagon."

"And that's part of the problem. If I'd have let it appear that Alvin had taken the girl away to safeguard her, your slaves would be scattered all over western Georgia. To nip the rebellion in the bud I had to make it appear that she had been killed by a grizzly."

"You couldn't have just brought her back?"

"There were others to consider."

"My son?"

"Among others, yes."

"Is it his brat?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known?"

"Since the first night she was assigned to my mating cabin."

"And you took it for mere bed-wenching?"

"Naturally. Your people have been known to cut the black slit before."

"Who else knows?"

"Nobody did until you came parading them back here."

"Then how did Orlando know?"

"Yorie."

"That doesn't figure. Yorie is half white, married to a Spaniard; she wouldn't give a damn about the birth of yet another mulatto."

"Not unless she had a reason."

"Such as?"

"I wish I really knew. If it was just to get me out of the way, to appease Orlando's jealousy, it would seem unimportant. But there is more to this than meets the eye. I pleaded with them to stop the rebels. They wouldn't listen to me. She seemed content to see you ruined, Alina killed."

"Nonsense!"

"Is it nonsense that Orlando would not stop the rebels?"

"I have only your word of that. Orlando has been with me a long time. How can I doubt his word?"

"Can you doubt that Yorie would stand back without fighting to save Alina's life?"

"Inconceivable. She was my wife's . . . personal maid." Yet the hesitation on Merritt's part opened the question mark in Mula's mind.

"Then she has nothing to . . . ah . . . seek revenge for?"

"This is absurd. I stand here talking to you like an equal and you have the audacity to cut my servants to ribbons."

"I talk to you," Mula flared, "because I feared for the safety of your daughter; because I didn't want to see your people slaughtered because of the greed of a few dissident mad-men."

There was the smallest break in the rhythm of their interrogation while Merritt considered.

"Alina! Why would they want to harm her?"

Mula did not appear surprised at Merritt's lack of concern.

"She's a woman, man. A white woman living in a black

jungle of over sexed pricks. You're the only plantation within a hundred miles that does not employ white guards. You trust your people, not wisely, but too well. One more little incident like last night could blow your fucking baby farm right back to the Congo."

"I've always tried to be good to them. Lately I've given Orlando a free hand. The trouble seems to stem from your plan."

"The trouble stems from many things, sir. The first being that you gave too much power to one man, and when it was partially taken away, it started a cancer growing around here. That still doesn't answer the riddle about Yorie's attitude toward Alina and their fevered desire for you to learn of Alvin's child. It may be a very harsh question, but who would gain Meral if the three of you were no more?"

The question hit Merritt like a lightning clap. He ambled back to the window like a mammoth moth lured to the light of truth. He had never given the distant future that much thought. What if they were all gone . . . except Yorie. He had never once acknowledged her in his mind as a sister-in-law, the aunt to his children. In a way, yes, she had blackmailed him into letting her marry Orlando. Was she capable of more devious things? How could he trust this black man over people he'd known most of their lives?

"You really want me to believe that you've done all this for me?" he questioned.

"For Alina."

"*Mistress Alina!*"

"Miss Alina."

"Shall I tell you something?"

"I can hardly stop you."

"All right. You've warned me about Orlando and the slaves. But how does it solve my first problem, Alvin?"

"Let Alvin solve his own problems." Mula watched him with his dark, hunter's eyes; watched for a movement, or a gesture, head nodding assent. In vain. "Who

was around to help you decide what to do with your first illegitimate black child, and don't tell me there hasn't been any."

Merritt said nothing.

"That boy is a man. More man than you or I. He accepted his parental responsibility, buying back the child after I'd sold it into slavery."

"I was not aware," Merritt said coldly, "that you were expected to do my job."

"Perhaps he did it out of human charity, but I doubt it. He's a man. Sex is important to a man. How can you blame him for going after a colored girl; what else was there? Would you have rather been confronted with incest or a homosexual craving black cocks?"

Merritt did not reply.

"They go native if they're around too long. And he's lived around them his whole life. What did you expect?"

"I . . ." Merritt gasped for the right words. ". . . I . . . expected him to *come to me!*"

For a long time Mula searched Merritt's face for something he could not find.

"I suggest, sir, that instead of worrying about your son's sexual proclivities you concern yourself with the future of Meral."

"Future?" Merritt repeated softly. "That's a funny word. My first grandchild is a niggah and you want me to consider his future?"

"All right," Mula said with sudden fierceness. "I'm wasting my bloody time. At least think of your daughter's safety. We were lucky last night, but it's far from over. You lost fifty slaves, maybe a half dozen more will die from their wounds, but the instigators of the plot still have your undivided ear. Amos and Jamie may be dead, but their followers are still alive. I can still keep them in line, but not if my every effort is undermined by Orlando and Yorie."

Merritt started to rage but he was interrupted from the doorway by Alvin. "You wished to see me, father?" His

young face was flushed by too little sleep, but there was also fear in his eyes. Sweat trickled down his face.

"Alvin," Merritt said pathetically. "Come in. Let's git this thing over with. You may leave us, Mula."

Alvin stood rigid, as though waiting for something terrible to happen. Once, twice, Merritt took deep breaths. Then he focused a murderous gaze on his son.

"Speak!"

Alvin, his face immobile, his body rigid, blinked once and gave Merritt a quiet solemn reply. "Sir, if yah want to kick my butt, you might get away with it. But if you start on Lea, you ain't goin' kick no more butts round-here. Ah'll kill yah fur sure."

It was said so simply, so matter of factly, without malice or anger, that Merritt was caught completely off guard.

He reached out and slapped Alvin with a quick, stinging cuff blow. Alvin blinked, not fully aware of what had happened. Then it hit him with almost as much impact as the blow itself. He stepped back into the hallway.

"I don' wan't' fight yah, father!" he yelled.

"Shut up! You raise your voice like that again and I'll put my fist in it! Now you listen! I don't give a good god-damn whether you have fucked her or not, but I do know that you're not gonna claim that child as my grandson. GIVE IT UP! You can wash your prick each time after you cut a darky, but can't go around claiming the mistakes . . . RIGHT?"

"I can't do it," he said weakly.

The fist caught Alvin high on the head. He went down on his knees, shook his head savagely to clear it, then came up slowly, covering his face with one hand, grasping for the door with the other. Merritt struck again, sending the boy flying down the length of the marble floored foyer. Alvin rose, turned toward the open front door and staggered into the sunlight. Hundreds of white eyeballs in black heads centered on the porch.

Alvin was stunned. He grasped at the verandah column for support. Merritt shuffled in behind him, set his weight properly, raised his left boot and planted it firmly on Alvin's backside.

Alvin spun in the air, flew over the steps in a somersault and landed flat on his back on the hard ground. Stunned and not quite sure what had happened, Alvin rolled over slowly and began pulling himself up. As Alvin lifted himself back to firing height, Merritt raced down the stairs, catching Alvin on the chin with a whistling right cross. The punch was so forcefully executed that it lifted Alvin from the ground, crashing him into the anchor hitching post. Instead of falling, he was held erect by the anchor's cross arm. A silly grin crossed his mouth before the corners of his lips bubbled up red. His eyes remained fixed on his father.

A million years seemed to pass before Merritt could comprehend the frantic screaming in his ears. He watched in dream like fantasy as Mula and Lea lifted the lifeless body off the sharp bill and fluke. He found himself wondering why Alvin didn't close his eyes. He'd make it up to the boy. Why, tomorrow he'd take him fishing down to the river, they hadn't fished or hunted together in years. Those were the things Merritt loved dearly, but had lost touch with. He hadn't fished or hunted with Alvin since . . . it was too far back to remember. But tomorrow they would go off together; just the two of them. He'd make the boy forget this colored wench.



## Chapter X

Orlando lay tensely beside his wife all that night, unable to sleep for the feverish throbbing of his thoughts. All night Orlando simmered, plotted, dreamed of his revenge on Mula. Alvin was dead, Merritt deranged, Meral in a state of turmoil. He cursed Mula for foiling his plans for the destruction of Alina. How easy it would have been . . . Alina, Alvin, Merritt . . . then, with the proof he possessed, he would be the husband of the owner of Meral, the master of Meral. Yorie breathed softly and regularly, the night air scented with the sweetness of her warm flesh. He loved her so . . . loved her enough to fight for her rights. He rose silently from the bed, taking a sharp bowie knife from his hunting rack. It was time to finish his plan.

They had taken two stout planks, placed them on four straight-backed chairs all covered with funeral crepe and laid Alvin out upon its surface in his best suit.

At sun down they started coming to the main house—the men with their hats in their hands and the women with damp handkerchiefs. They passed into the sitting room, bowing slightly to Alina sitting very still in a motionless rocking chair, her face very white against a very black dress and staring straight ahead into nothingness. Many had known him since a baby; it was therefore a death in the family. Their hearts bled for the expressionless face and dead eyes of Lea. There were fifty-four

others to be buried on the morrow, but this was the most senseless death of all.

The people of Meral all came to pay their respects but three . . . Orlando, Yorie and Merritt. When the last had returned to their cabins, Mula took Alina gently by the hand, leaving Lea to stand the lonely vigil.

She shuddered as they passed the anchor, vowing to have it torn from the ground. The lump came up from her throat and into her eyes and the sob tore itself out of her and he held her shoulders while she cried. Through her tears she said just two words, "Marry me."

Mula looked at her and he said, "There is no one to do it your way. It would have to be Ashanti."

"So be it. I'll give father something to really storm about."

And before Mama Zella and Big Sam the words were said. The rich, sonorous words of the Ashanti: "To my man, my prince, my king, my days are given. To his words I will obey, to his name shall I bring honor. To his compound shall I bring the laughter of male children. My days shall be his days, my tears, his tears; my laughter, his laughter. No man shall I look upon in this life or the one hereafter. I, Alina, daughter of Merritt, leave my father's house and am now the wife and chattel of Nkumula, Prempeh of the Ashanti."

And he kissed her after her fashion. But the feeling of total victory had been ruined by Alvin's death.

They stood before him hand in hand. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he started when Alina repeated impatiently: "Father, I have been talking to you, and you have been staring at me as if I were an image."

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said, coldly.

She walked to him, rigid and straight, her face a mask of glacial calm. Yet, though he looked at her in silence, without emotion, he saw her resemblance to Jeanmarie.

"I do not wish to trick you in anyway. We, Mula and I, have come to tell you that we are now one. He shall live in this house as my husband."

He was surprised, and incredulous. He regarded her intently, but saw nothing changed in her look, in the steadfast brilliance of her eyes. Her statement brought a moment of lucidity and was also the fateful shove that sent him forever into a darker hell.

He shrugged. "Jeanmarie, I always thought you would come to your senses, and at least respect my dignity. Is it the way in New Orleans to move your stupid lover right into your husband's house?"

His smile was very unpleasant, its amusement malicious.

"Father, snap out of it. I am your daughter, Alina. Have you lost your good senses?"

"No one ever disputed my intelligence," he said, deliberately lowering his voice to a murmur so that it was almost inaudible. "Do sit down, my dear wife, and we will go over it all again." He looked at the mantle clock with elaborate concentration. Surely we have time before you bed with your lover."

Alina flushed. "Please!"

"Please? You seem prone to beg," he pointed out in a hard thin voice. "Please, Merritt, I'll give you another child. Please, Merritt, I'll never see Fendway again. Please, Merritt, I'll never say anything about you and Yorie ever again. Please! Please! Please! I'm sick to death of your childish pleading."

Merritt paused. Their eyes clashed. Merritt retained his smile, a little disdainful, and very removed and untouched. Alina started to speak but was cautioned to silence by Mula.

"Nothing to say," Merritt urged, nastily. "That's so unlike you, my dear. You were always so glib with your lies. Need I tell you that you are excessively vulgar, Jeanmarie? You are not clever. You are only disgusting. You were lucky that the twins were born white. What would you have done had they been tar-babies? What an onerous life you have left for us . . . but an intriguing one. I shall never let them marry, so don't plan on cuddling any grandchildren."

He paused, fixed his sparkling harsh eyes upon her, and continued: "I still have hope that Yorie will return to me. If I'm to sleep with a colored woman I might as well do so with one who is honest. It is hard for me to believe that you are really twin sisters."

He didn't even hear Alina gasp, see her small and delicate hand clench briefly at her throat to stifle the scream.

"You were an obdurate fool, Jeanmarie. You've known what I've wanted for a long time, but you sold out to Fendway. He can't help you any longer, my dear. I went to him tonight. Outside of actual embezzlement or theft I didn't know what to charge him with; so I just strangled him. See, my dear . . . see my money? He had it all . . . all right in that dank little room. Do you know the room, my dear? Surely he's entertained you there. But he won't entertain you ever again. Nor, Jeanmarie, my sweet, will you ever plead again. Say please once more, my darling, before I blow a hole in your pretty little lying head."

Alina shuddered, averted her face. Mula took her gently by the arm. She moved mechanically across the floor to the doorway. There, she paused, looked back at her father with haughty withdrawal and contempt.

"We'll bury Alvin in the morning," she said.

"He doesn't understand," Mula warned. "He's marching to a different drummer now. I don't think he'll be dangerous."

"I hope you're right."

Alina closed the door firmly behind her. As she did so, the rooster announced the approach of dawn. Merritt laughed softly to himself, gave himself a brief inspection in the mirror, and, humming under his breath, ran quickly down the back stairs. He was once again at Cottonwood. Jeanmarie was sleeping silently in their four poster and he was off for his nightly bedding with Yorie.

## Chapter XI

"Massa Mula! Massa Mula!" Big Sam's voice boomed through the lower hallway. He burst in upon the mourners, gave a cursory nod to Alina, and nearly screamed: "Ya'all best come quick, Massa Mula. Mama Zella says der sur am gonna be trouble."

"What is it, Big Sam?" Alina questioned.

"He jist better come faster dan fast!"

The scene invited alarm, surveying it at a run. The overseer's house at the end of a row of slave cabins was surrounded by silent, swaying figures. In the open doorway Mula spied the silhouette of a woman's form leaning eagerly forward with arms outstretched in an appeal for help. Mula felt that grip upon the throat which comes from an indefinable fear which no words can explain and no plummet sound.

"What is it, Mama Zella?"

"Lawdy, lawdy! Dere am trouble in dis 'ere house—great trouble. Ya'll gits back," she cautioned the other slaves. "De *massa* am here ta handle dis. Git! Git yore curious black asses back t'yore cabins."

She shoved Mula into the cabin, slamming the split-pine door behind them.

Mula took it in all at once. The tiny living room was a shambles: furniture upset, dishes smashed, clothing shredded; and all covered with blood that was already turning a dark brown.

He was too dazed to comprehend such hatred, much

less the passions which engendered it. He only knew that something horrible—something beyond the conception of even his mind had taken place in that room; and the terror of it made him speechless.

"Are they all . . . ?"

"Dey is! Miss Yorie am bad off."

Mula found her twisted body behind the settee. Her nightgown was torn away from the waist, blood oozed from the multiple wounds around her chest. He could be of little help.

With a sinking heart he listened to Mama Zella relate the events that had transpired so suddenly. He had little doubt that Merritt, in his far gone mind, had come to bed with Yorie. Caught by the jealous Orlando, the men had struggled. Who had been the first slain could only be a matter of speculation—but the master of Meral and the overseer were both dead.

There was a groan; then a gasping sigh from Yorie, and silence settled upon the room and upon Mula's heart and so far as he knew upon the whole created world.

For the only time since he had been taken away from his native village, he wished that he would have been killed that night that he first saw Merritt Frazer.

When Alina had gone out into the square that day to view Alvin's body, she had at once decided to follow Mula, with regal disdain of half-way methods. To her own straight-thinking mind, unhampered with petty conventional intricacies, it was all perfectly clear. The ordinary woman would have waited, perhaps in deep distress and tearful anxiety, for the world to right itself. Alina was not of the type that sheds tears or remains inactive. To one man in the world, she had said, "I love you" and to her that settled everything.

Mula joined Alina and Lea in the drawing room. As he met the hunger in the woman's questioning eyes, his heart sickened at his news. He could only say that her father, Yorie and Orlando were dead. He did not mention the fact

that Merritt had raped Yorie. That detail he wished to spare her.

She listened to his report, and at its end announced evenly, "thank you." But he knew that something must be done. A woman who could let herself be storm-tossed by grief might ride safely out of such an affair when the tempest had beaten itself out, but she, who merely smiled more sadly, would not have even the relief that comes from surrender to tears.

"Somehow," said Mula, "I feel that these deaths are my responsibility. Shall I go away?"

"Mula!" she breathed in a tense whisper. "You can never leave me."

"The people!" exclaimed Mula, breathlessly. "They are torn apart by all this blood-letting."

"If my wounds can heal, so can theirs. We must decide how to run Meral."

"My God!"

"What does that mean?" she indignantly demanded, looking at the man whose face had become rigid and unreadable.

"It means that they will be expecting freedom!" he replied, shortly. "It means that they know that they now have a black master, and I'm afraid . . ." In his anger and surprise of the sudden knowledge that he was now master of Meral, he had almost forgotten to whom he was speaking. Now, with full realization of the situation, he bit off his utterance.

She was standing very straight, as regal as his mother.

"You needn't be afraid to admit it," she said quietly, "you are in command."

"I'm afraid," said Mula, "that will mean many changes."

Alina's eyes narrowed.

"I am not requesting," she announced. "I am telling you to take charge, as my husband."

Mula walked over to the door, and planting his wide back against its panels, folded his arms. His voice was deliberate and dangerous:

"It is not worth while to bandy lies with you. We both know that my purpose in coming here was to gain my freedom so that I could rightfully return to my land as the leader of the Ashanti people. It has been many years. I sometimes wonder if I would find a land to return to, or a people to govern.

"That is not all," went on Mula. We both know that we live in an alien world. For you to learn the truth meant your unmasking. Will you be acceptable again in a white society? If you produce my children will they be black or white? Will we, or our children, have to stand prosecution and persecution for our act of love?"

As she listened, Alina's face betrayed not only love, but also a slowly dawning wonder that dilated her deep blue pupils.

"I stand by my wedding oath," avowed Alina, earnestly.

"That," observed Mula, "will be a matter for you to prove. If I return to Africa, with these people, it would then be an alien world for you."

"No, no!" Her voice was charged with genuine terror, and the hand she raised in pleading protest trembled.

"You see . . ." the Ashanti's voice was impassioned in its bitterness, ". . . I am not shielding myself. I am giving you the unrelieved truth. When I determined the fact of Merritt's death, I saw my way clear to return home. I did not at that time consider that I was the husband of the dead man's daughter. There are those who could make much of what has happened at Meral during the past few days. This is a slave farm, nothing more. If we free the people, others will find ways of reenslaving them.

"I tell you," he groaned, "I have at least been true to one thing in life. I have loved you. I began by scheming and ended by loving."

Suddenly, he strode across the room and faced Alina.

"I don't really know you," he said passionately, "but I am your husband. I am Ashanti—a black! Life can drive a man to anything. Life has driven me to most things, but not to all. I had thought that here my story would be



ended. The story is not ended. You say I must decide the fate of Meral. As you said that an idea began to dawn on me in a nebulous sort of way. I could free the slaves, or take them back to Africa, and take you with me. Our fields are not as full of grain as these, and there are many years that we have to hunt far afield for meat. You will not find a house as fine as this. But if I go, you must go as my wife."

Alina remained silent.

"I possess the Golden Stool of the Ashanti. I am, then, my father's son. A kingdom is not so much the land upon which we walk as it is the people who populate that land. And as the *muzkal* teaches, an Ashanti is born to his king, to serve him for life. Does it matter if they return to Africa as my chattel, or remain here as my chattel? No! We at Meral are an island cut off from the main stream of life just as the Ashanti were in Africa. We shall survive because we are a strong people, an intelligent people. Slavery cannot endure forever.

"I'm not thinking so much of us, we shall pass; but what of the Meral we shall leave for Alvin and Lea's boy, Little Sam, and our own children. By all that's wonderful, it is the land that must endure.

"Tomorrow we shall bury all of our dead, my wife.

"And the memory of why they are dead?"

"And the memory. Tonight I shall go to our people and tell them how it shall be."

"And I shall go with you," Alina promptly declared.



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